VIVY

Prototype

NOVEL

2

WRITTEN BY
Tappei Nagatsuki
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"I will protect you for my entire life."
"And I will protect *you* for my entire life."

"Dad, I'm back. Are you awake?"
Diva was at a loss for words when she saw the elderly man lying in the bed.

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Airship
Seven Seas Entertainment

VIVY prototype volume 2

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Prologue

IT WAS A WEDDING blessed by no one.

The ceremony took place on a small island some distance from the mainland. Bride and groom met in a decrepit church plopped beside a promenade stretching along the deserted shoreline. Its wallpaper was cracked, the statue of the Virgin Mary discolored. All the electric lighting had been removed, leaving only the evening light streaming in through the stained-glass windows. Whoever abandoned the chapel must have decided there was no point in reusing the pews, with their backside book racks, since they had been left to rot. Their presence only emphasized the emptiness.

No one sat in the pews; no priest stood at the pulpit. The only people in the church were the bride and the groom.

The groom, Saeki Tatsuya, smiled awkwardly. “Kind of feels improper, doesn’t it?” he said.

“I told you, you don’t have to make it so formal,” said Grace, the bride, returning his smile through her veil.

Although Saeki was thirty years old, people who saw his slender build and baby face often assumed he was younger. He wore small, rimless glasses and had done his best to style his hair for the occasion, but his obvious discomfort in the white tuxedo made the whole look fall apart. Evidently, he was far from used to wearing something so formal.

Grace, on the other hand, wore her pale peach gown perfectly, despite having only tried it on once. She carried herself with the poise one would expect from a bride. Her shoulder-length black hair, which she normally wore in a ponytail, was now in an updo. She rarely wore makeup, but today it was tastefully done, adding to her feminine charm. Grace was ten years younger than Saeki, and looked it too, but her motherly composure made her seem all the more mature.

It was Saeki who suggested they do the ceremony in a proper location, even if no one would attend. It wasn’t surprising, considering

every single venue in the city had refused to host their wedding. He hadn't expected even the priests to shy away, though.

"All right, shall we?" Grace prompted, and Saeki picked up the pen for the tablet.

Not even a single candlestick adorned the altar, let alone a decorated altar cloth. There was just the inorganic tablet with its organic liquid crystal display, illuminated with their vows.

I will always come to you as quickly as I can.

This was one of Saeki's vows.

The couple had met on the job—they both worked in the same building, but in different departments. Saeki always adjusted his shifts to align with hers and suggested they travel home together, but on several occasions, he became so engrossed in his research that he broke his promise to go with her.

"Th-this month is fine, of course," said Saeki, then he signed below the words and handed the pen to Grace.

She chuckled. "The vow isn't just for this month, it's for your whole life."

I will not push myself.

Grace read over her vow in silence, then signed the tablet. She'd never known illness until she had an organ transplant, which was when she started to feel as unwell as any normal person. As a nurse in the medical division of the research institute Saeki worked for, she was just as dedicated to her work as Saeki was to his. Even after falling ill, she continued to push herself. Her first-ever lovers' quarrel with Saeki started because she'd told him off when he voiced his concern for her well-being. Nowadays, the spat was a fond memory.

We will protect each other for our entire lives.

Saeki frowned as he looked at the vow they shared. "I guess I'll just sign again below this?"

"These are private vows, so there isn't any set way of doing it," Grace said. "It isn't like we'll be submitting it to the government."

“Still not proper.”

Saeki reluctantly signed his name a second time, as did Grace. Once they pressed the upload button, the triggered program created a file for the data accessible only by the two of them.

Saeki watched as a message popped up, informing them that the data had been stored without issue. He looked over to see Grace gazing out at the empty chapel.

Seeing something out of the ordinary in her expression, he was overcome with regret. “Sorry… I’m really sorry it happened this way.”

Grace shook her head. “That’s not what’s on my mind. In fact, I’m happy.”

“What is it, then?”

“This place hasn’t been used in so long, it’ll probably be demolished someday soon. But we gave it purpose again. That’s important to me.” Grace smiled as if to say, *You understand that, don’t you?*

Seeing that smile, Saeki was at a loss for words. “…”

Of course he understood. He also felt trust in that smile and an utterly natural love blooming beneath it. It hit him then how right it felt that they would be husband and wife.

“I will protect you for my entire life,” he said.

“And I will protect *you* for my entire life,” she replied.

Their hearts—the organs they’d exchanged—thumped in harmony inside their chests.

It was the year 20XX.

The first time in history a human married an AI.

***

Snow floated down through the winter sky just as an explosion tore through the air. The combat helicopter, with its chewed-up armor, didn’t even survive the entire drop to the ocean before it succumbed to the flames.

Several drones cut through the falling snow toward another helicopter, which fired off a spray of flares, attempting to flee the danger. Once the drones were within the five-meter range of effect, they sent a signal to their maxed-out explosive payloads and self-destructed.

"What's happening?" Vivy asked.

"…"

This was a rarity—Matsumoto seldom passed up an opportunity for a quippy reply.

As a biting wind whipped across the surface of the water, a civilian tour boat picked up the fragments of its comrades—the helicopters that had fallen to the water—then picked up speed. The engine's shriek carried all the way to Vivy's audio sensors. Just as the boat was a minute away from landfall at top speed, there was movement on the shore.

It was the cylindrical forms of countless construction AIs. Like human divers, they tumbled into the sea, scattering droplets with every splash. The AIs perfectly calculated the ideal path to the boat's intended landing point. They seemed entirely unconcerned about saltwater corrosion or the frigid winter waters themselves.

After a few seconds of silence, the prow of the ship jumped as it rode up onto the rocky shore. Fire broke out, and the boat skidded to a halt. The AIs had gone into the water for a suicide attack.

Several humans with parachutes descended from the skies, as if the flames were a signal. They were trying to escape the explosions, their forms becoming whiter by the second as snow clung to their parachutes and bodies. Vivy could see with her eye cameras that their arms and heads hung limp. They were all unconscious.

More drones followed in merciless pursuit, intent on leaving no survivors.

"What's happening, Matsumoto?" Vivy said again, her tone forceful and angry this time, but he still didn't respond. Measured directly, she was still over two kilometers from what she was watching. There was no way she would make it there in time.

Another explosion boomed in the distance.

Vivy couldn’t hear their screams. She couldn’t see the victims’ bodies or the red of their spilled blood. All she could do was watch as the slaughter continued—too close for her to look away, too far for her to help. Only one thing was for certain…

AIs were slaughtering humans.

Chapter 1:
The Songstress and the World That Advanced Too Much

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THE MOMENT THE PROGRAM activated from its closed-off partition, Vivy did as the sequence dictated and began checking herself and her surroundings. She didn't see any immediate threats, and there were no pings from her most sensitive echolocation scan. Nothing was moving nearby: her system's self-check discovered no noise or significant changes from her last activation.

Safety provisionally confirmed.

Vivy referred to her latest logs, just as a human might reflect upon the prior night's events after waking. First, she recalled the AI who had been welcoming and kind to her. Next came that AI's twin sister, someone Vivy had engaged with in a fierce battle.

"Estella… Elizabeth…"

During the previous Singularity Point, Vivy had boarded an escape shuttle from the space hotel Sunrise and eventually touched down safely at an Earth airport. People planetside were in a panic with Sunrise out of control—if the space hotel crashed into Earth, it could mean considerable damage. Soon after, news broke that the station *had* crashed, causing no collateral damage whatsoever. Estella had effectively purged parts of the station to make this possible.

Evacuees were sent to the nearest hospital. Few had obvious injuries, but the stress from the unexpected and life-threatening event was enough to merit their admittance. Additionally, the space tourism industry had an obligation to provide basic checkups on all those who returned.

That was where Vivy had parted ways with Arnold and Yuzuka. The pair asked Vivy if they would meet again someday. After searching for what

to say, Vivy answered, “Well, someday.”

Vivy knew they never *would* see each other again—or, at the very least, she knew she couldn’t make an effort to see them. It took everything she had to respond as she did. Because she was working on the Singularity Project, Vivy couldn’t do anything outside the Singularity Points. She rarely even woke up in between, and she needed to keep her existence hidden. This was all to prevent her from having an unnecessary influence on history.

Once she’d parted ways with Arnold and Yuzuka, Vivy followed the falsified schedule Matsumoto had created and was transported to the AI corporation that developed her: Organize Generation Corp., or OGC for short. There, Vivy’s body underwent repairs for the damage she had suffered, which turned out to be a complete overhaul. Then she went back to NiaLand, where she went to sleep and handed control of her body back over to Diva.

Now she was awake again.

The first Singularity Point was the AI Naming Law incident, when she first met Matsumoto. The second Singularity Point was the Sun-Crash Incident. Since she’d awoken once more, it meant the third Singularity Point had come.

A quick look around doesn’t show any real changes, Vivy thought as she looked around. She was very familiar with the room she’d found herself in.

Vivy sat up in bed, which was really her standby station for charging and data cleanup. As she did, the chandelier flickered to life. The room’s decorations were done in a somewhat Western style. Flowers had been placed here and there, giving the room an air of elegance without excess. This was the songstress’s room on the top floor of the Princess Palace in NiaLand, which visitors could see on the behind-the-scenes tour. These chambers might have been a bit extravagant for a mere AI, but Diva wasn’t just *any* AI—she had a duty to embody the lovely songstress who sang for her guests, even when she wasn’t onstage.

Vivy looked at the neat stacks of fan letters and presents (it was admirable that there wasn't a single food item among them), and her expression softened. She went to approach the gifts, then stopped herself.

"…"

There were clearly more presents than when she, Vivy, had been the one singing. She looked closer and saw that all the vases in the rooms had power switches. They must've been presents as well. If she turned one on, it would probably display some information on the sender along with a personalized message. Apparently, Diva had been doing well while Vivy was asleep.

Vivy looked at her reflection in a large oval mirror. She was neatly dressed in pale blue pajamas. They were high quality with lots of frills—very cute. Vivy couldn't remember ever wearing such a thing.

Is this part of Diva's performance? I doubt they'd do behind-the-scenes tours while she's asleep, though…

An AI obviously didn't need pajamas, but she especially didn't need a mirror; she could accurately determine the status of her body on her own. Evidently, Diva had to be NiaLand's songstress even when she was asleep.

If necessary, Vivy would analyze Diva's logs later. She should at least make sure there were no discrepancies in how she was perceived while Vivy was operating.

At that moment, she sensed something odd. "Hm?" There were no changes in the body she saw reflected in the mirror, but…

She held up her right hand in a fist and thoroughly examined it, front and back. She activated the actuators in her fingers one by one, starting with her clenched thumb and moving across to her pinky, opening them all straight. Then she closed them again, starting with her pinky and going to her thumb. She stretched one leg out in front of her with pointed toes. Forty-five degrees. Ninety degrees. A hundred and eighty degrees. She launched herself into a backflip from her one foot and landed. Everything was perfectly smooth.

Were my movement circuits and calculations updated?

The internal mechanisms that controlled her shifting body weight and posture were clearly smoother than the last time she had activated; she must have had some serious maintenance and upgrades even after her last major overhaul.

I really should review Diva's logs.

Just as she'd made the calculation to do so, a voice came from the mirror. "What's going on, Diva? Up at this time of night?"

Vivy's self-defense programming forced her to take an automatic step back and fall into a defensive stance.

"Are you underprepared for tomorrow's performance? Or did you want to double-check your costumes?"

"Uh…" Vivy didn't recall hearing the voice before; it sounded like it belonged to a mature adult woman.

While she grappled for a response, the voice prattled on. "I don't recommend staying up late, but if you're unsure about your costumes, I'll show some of your classics."

At that, Vivy's pajamas instantly transformed into her familiar stage outfit. There wasn't even time for her surprised emotional pattern to show on her face. Her clothes changed in rapid sequence, going from alternate colorways of her usual stage gear to a gown exclusively for ballads, to a boyish outfit she donned for upbeat bops.

"There. I think you should be safe with this order, considering tomorrow's setlist."

It was then that Vivy finally noticed the minuscule camera set into the mirror's frame. The lens moved slightly as it adjusted its focus. The clothes were holograms.

Vivy kept her circuits from expressing her surprised emotional pattern and touched the projected clothing. She wasn't certain what technology it used, but she could feel it, and the cloth crinkled under her touch.

"Diva? You're acting strange… Please wait a moment," the mirror said in a concerned tone.

A few seconds later, there was a knock on the door.

“Hellooo? What’s wrooong?”

Vivy didn’t even have time to respond to her visitor or invite them in before the door swung open…and a giant porcupine barged inside.

Vivy’s official height was 156 centimeters; this porcupine came up to her waist. The dense, soft-looking quills growing from his back swayed as he scuttled over to Vivy on his absurdly short legs. He was Harry, another NiaLand cast member. Harry’s personality was set to “troublemaker.” He would act sorry when his tricks were found out, but then he’d just go back to pranking, like a little boy would. For this reason, Harry was immensely popular with kids.

Harry tutted. “Not good, Diva. You have to get up early in the morning, so you’ve gotta sleep. Or do you wanna stay up late together? Ooh, should we do that? Yeah, let’s!”

Vivy remained silent, calculations running in the background as she tried to figure out what was going on. She was familiar with both the mirror and Harry—their presence alone wasn’t the problem here. As far as Vivy could remember, the mirror never talked, and Harry never did anything offstage or spoke outside of his programmed lines. He hadn’t been installed with a conversation function.

Her memory circuits dredged up the profile of a woman she used to know, someone who should have been here. Although such humans had taken care of Diva before, it appeared to be Harry and the mirror’s responsibility now—setting aside his suggestion to stay up late, of course.

Has a great deal of technology advanced? she wondered. Realizing how careless she’d been when judging the situation, she immediately accessed her internal clock. She should have checked it right when she activated.

Considering her improved body, the AIs who interacted so easily with her, and the holographic technology that could replicate clothing with tactile feedback, it was obvious that quite some time had passed since she had last been active—since the fall of Sunrise. Thirty years, maybe? No, forty. Regardless, she needed to act in accordance with the era so she didn’t draw unnecessary attention to herself.

The time was just past midnight. It was winter. December, to be exact. And the year was—

"Diva?"

"…"

Vivy ignored Harry and conducted a second self-check. There were no abnormalities. Her internal clock was functioning properly. The date was correct.

"Hmm, you really do seem off. Should we datalink so I can see what's going on? If we do, we really are gonna end up staying up late toni—"

Harry's voice suddenly cut off. Then came the whirring sound of a hard disk running at high speeds. A few moments later, he spoke up again, but his voice was completely different.

"Ugh, what is with all these irrational motion routines?! Such a pain. Uh, testing, testing, one, two, three! Vivy? Can you hear me?"

Vivy stared at Harry—or rather, at his body. "Matsumoto…?"

"What's the deal with that inappropriately immature and flashy getup you're in? Er, you sure this guy's eye cameras aren't broken?"

Matsumoto intentionally put an exasperated expression on Harry's face, and Vivy looked down at the tank top and shorts she was wearing. Well, not *literally* wearing; they were still being projected onto her body.

The mirror piped up, "Harry, you are exhibiting abnormal data. Please execute a self-check imme—"

"Be quiet, would you?" Matsumoto snapped. It immediately obeyed, the output to its invisible speakers dropping off to silence. He must have cut it off himself.

"Did you hear that, lady? 'Harry.' Pfft, was he named that because he's 'hairy'? A bit too easy, don't you think? That's about as creative as naming a fish 'Finny.' What kind of—gah!"

Vivy gripped the quills on Matsumoto's back as hard as she could and yanked him up. His tiny legs flailed in the air. "Don't make fun of Harry's name. The park guests decided it through a public vote. More importantly,

what's this about?" She brought her face right to his and glared at him through her eye cameras. "It's only been five years and eleven days since Sunrise. How has technology advanced this much?"

"Okay, okay. Just set me down for a sec. You're committing animal abuse!"

She complied and set Matsumoto, in his stolen porcupine body, down on the floor.

Fifteen years had passed between the first Point—the AI Naming Law incident—and the second Point. The space tourism industry had advanced shockingly fast during that time. NiaLand had too, but nothing about it had really stood out to Vivy.

This time, however, only a mere five years had passed, yet she was surrounded by technology and AIs she didn't remember—and she hadn't even stepped out of her room. Vivy didn't even need the original history data Matsumoto usually kept to himself to know that this rate of advancement was abnormal.

She and Matsumoto were working to prevent the impending war between humans and AIs. And for that to happen, they had to destroy AI.

"I was surprised too," Matsumoto said. "In the original history, this sort of technology didn't come into daily life for another thirty years, and the two of us shouldn't even have started back up yet."

Vivy's eyebrow twitched. "Do you mean we somehow failed on Sunrise?"

"I'll fill you in on the way. First, let's get a move on! We're heading to these coordinates."

There was no time lag between his words and the coordinates arriving in Vivy's database. Matsumoto shuffled over to the door, leading the way.

"Wait. Are you planning on going in that body?"

"Don't underestimate me, Vivy. His exterior and interior might be ancient and awkward, but with me at the helm—"

"Let Harry go."

Matsumoto turned back to her with a questioning look.

Her tone was forceful as she added, “Harry is a cast member here. He has his work onstage and he’s been given the responsibility of managing Diva. He’s got nothing to do with our mission. Don’t take his role from him.”

“My real body’s in a bit of a *situation* right now, though.”

But Vivy didn’t back down. Her eyes remained fixed on Matsumoto.

Eventually, he relented., “All right, but you’ve really got to do something about that outfit. It’s totally inappropriate for your age.”

“The next time you say that, I’ll punch you. This is Diva’s outfit. Don’t crush a songstress’s dreams.”

“I think beating someone up is more likely to crush her dreams, but okay…”

Vivy went to the back of the room and started opening dresser drawers. The articles inside were different than she remembered but luckily, the ones she was looking for hadn’t been disposed of. The top and bottoms she pulled out were real clothes, made for mobility. The color was the last thing she would’ve worn onstage, but it would blend in with the night.

The moment she put the clothes on, they were overwritten with a hologram of the stage clothes she’d been wearing before.

“Cut the hologram,” she told Matsumoto.

“Vivy, is your logic circuit operating properly? You don’t have to wear real clothes; you can just use the Dresser—that’s the name for this augmented reality technology, by the way.”

“This technology didn’t exist in this time period in the original history, right? Besides, I feel uncomfortable going outside without actually wearing anything. Cut it off.”

“So serious.”

Matsumoto accessed the mirror, cutting its output, and the clothes Vivy was actually wearing reappeared. Vivy then realized that the earring she was wearing had actually been displaying the hologram.

“Output on the receiver side?” she asked, touching her earring.

“Yep. The mirror is still at the stage where it won’t function without a sender and a receiver. Output from accessories will be the way of the future, with clothing available at fair prices—whoa, that’s expensive! Sheesh, that’s got a few more zeroes tacked on than there were in the original future.”

Vivy ignored Matsumoto and his pointless information—probably accessed via the internet—and moved her earring from her right ear to her left, as she’d done for Sunrise. Then she looked into the mirror.

“…”

She looked at her reflection. She had the exact same body as Diva; the only differences were the real clothing she wore and the location of her earring. Vivy consciously tried to make her expression different, so she didn’t look like the songstress, but rather the AI that she was, bearing a different mission.

“Vivy, I’ll ask again: is your logic circuit operating properly? Changing the earring’s location won’t have any effect on its reception. I cut off the output on the sending side, anyway.”

“I’m fine.”

She stepped out of the room, leaving Matsumoto behind with his doubts. The chandelier in the room automatically dimmed. Harry and the mirror remained there, not a single bit of their interaction with Vivy remaining in their hard disks.

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SAEKI CURSED his own carelessness.

“You are exceeding the legal speed limit,” came the auto-generated voice from his car’s internal speakers. “Immediately release manual driving or reduce your spee—”

“I know!” Saeki shouted.

The piercing screech of metal on metal rang out behind him—the sound of bullets hitting his car. They were aiming for the tires.

Up ahead, the other cars in traffic kept a perfect distance of twenty meters between each vehicle and drove at exactly the speed limit with not even a single kilometer-per-hour deviation. Whipping the wheel this way and that, Saeki wove through the line of self-driven cars. Each time he passed one, a notice popped up on the dashboard's organic LCD display informing him he was violating safe driving laws. Alerts blared nonstop within the car. The roads were heated, meaning there wasn't any snow on them, but his tires still squealed as they slid.

"Maintain a proper distance—"

"Display rear camera view!"

The car responded, "Understood," and the sight from the rearview mirror was magnified.

There were three—no, four—cars following him, their high beams dipping and jerking wildly. That was more cars than before; reinforcements must've arrived.

"Damn!" Saeki swore and pushed the accelerator to the floor, trying to hold back his fear at the increasing speeds.

The chase had started the moment he got on the freeway—the same one he took home from work every day. While it might be late into the night, Saeki never thought *they* would come at him so brazenly, even if there had been a lot of information that should have told him this was coming.

The abnormal advancement of AI technology over the past few years had increased their discontent and unease. And yet, they were acting with disconcerting quietness. Even the least imaginative person in the world could have figured out what was happening with a bit of thought.

It was the calm before the storm.

As Saeki came up to a sharp bend in the road, he let up on the accelerator, and the car rocked violently.

"Agh!"

He lost control of the steering as the car raced toward the guardrail. Out of reflex, he turned the wheel and slammed on the brakes. The tires locked and the car skid. He heard a bang: something white filled his vision.

Saeki tumbled from the car, confused. He was on all fours on the asphalt when he finally realized his car had crashed into the guardrail, and the white thing that had blocked his vision was the airbag. An unpleasant smell filled his nostrils. The right rear tire was warped and smoking, thanks to the friction of the crash.

It had been shot.

"An ambulance and the police are being dispatched to this location. Please do not leave the vicinity," came an AI voice from one of the streetlights.

The streetlights, placed at regular intervals down the road, helped self-driving vehicles determine their location, used their internal cameras to monitor for crashes, and automatically contacted the relevant authorities when necessary. But the voice was cut off by the sound of sudden braking as the four pursuing cars came to a stop around Saeki, one after another.

Without pause, the driver and passenger doors opened on the closest car and two men came out, pointing handguns at Saeki and using their doors as shields. The men ignored the streetlight as it announced, "A weapon violating gun control laws has been detected. Quickly—"

"You…!" Saeki groaned, voice low. Paying no mind to the blood running from his mouth—he didn't know when he'd cut his lip—he stood, glaring at his pursuers.

He hadn't been entirely sure because of the high speeds and darkness, but the cars were the same ones he'd suspected. They were old, outdated models without the self-driving function required by modern law. The guns pointed at him from behind the cars were also old-school revolvers, the kind that didn't have the fingerprint locks required for verifying the user.

It was Toak, the organization that called on humanity to free themselves from AIs for their own well-being.

"We were told to take you back in one piece, so don't resist," said the man standing behind the driver-side door.

“Who ordered that? Kakitani?” Saeki asked.

“A weapon violating gun control la—”

Bang! A shot rang out and Saeki instinctively ducked. The streetlight stopped repeating itself. There was a bullet hole in the speaker.

The two men slowly stepped out from behind the car doors and moved toward Saeki, perhaps deciding he wasn’t armed. The other men didn’t make a move to exit their cars, probably prepared to chase after him if it came to that.

Saeki desperately scanned the area, his head spinning. He couldn’t let himself be captured here. Ever since that day four years ago, he swore he would live only to achieve his goal, but he still hadn’t done it. He didn’t care what happened to him. He didn’t care about his social standing, his future, or even his life in the right circumstances.

For her, I have to…

A voice came from behind him. “Please stay still.”

Just as he went to look, a black gale rushed past him. By the time Saeki realized it was a person, they were right up close with the two men, twisting to strike them with a kick.

“What the—?!”

The shocked Toak agents didn’t even have time to turn their guns on their attacker before they were struck down by the sweeping kick.

“Matsumoto,” the interloper whispered.

“Yeehaw!” A strange voice let out a holler from the car Saeki had been driving. “Let’s show ’em what you can do, you old bucket of bolts!” It lurched forward like a bull at a rodeo and sped up rapidly, despite the destroyed rear tire. The front jerked up, and it sprang at the men’s vehicles.

Saeki heard the crunch of car against car.

His car had been driving normally up until this point, but now it was practically alive, crushing the Toak cars beneath its frame. The Toak members tumbled out of their cars in the rush to escape, but before they could draw their guns, the dark figure neutralized them. Then it was over, and all was quiet.

For ten whole seconds, Saeki stood gaping in shock, then he watched the figure stride up to him. Long hair, soft features. A woman. She wore black clothing and had an earring on her left ear.

"Are you all right?" she asked. Her voice was beautiful.

"Y-yeah… Thank you. You saved me!" he blurted out. He gathered from her appearance and speech that she was an AI—and then he realized exactly who she was. "Diva…? Is that really you?"

A look of distrust clouded her face. She looked at Saeki's car for some time with a complicated expression. Eventually, her face softened, and she said, "Yes."

"I knew it! But why are you here?"

High-pitched sirens wailed in the distance, interrupting their conversation. It seemed the streetlight's earlier dispatch had arrived.

Saeki hesitated. Having them protect him was an option, but being taken into police custody wasn't ideal, not after the attack from Toak. Besides, his safety wasn't the most important thing here. Everything he did had to be for his goal.

He looked at Diva. Maybe this was a sign. He'd been clenching his fists without thinking, but he squeezed them even tighter and said, "Diva… this might sound strange, but will you come with me right now? I have a favor to ask you."

Her response was immediate. "That won't be a problem. I have a favor to ask of you too."

. : 3 : .

SAEKI TOOK VIVY down windy mountain roads to a remote house in the wilderness, about an hour from the main drag. It was deep within a forest that had been planted by humans, the trees lined up neatly along the low mountain currently blanketed in snow. There were no houses nearby, at least not until you traveled back down to the base. Vivy's sensors detected

the sound of waves breaking and the smell of a beach from what must have been the nearby ocean. According to Saeki, this was a safehouse no one else knew about.

The damaged car trundled slowly on autopilot into the garage, which opened automatically.

Vivy stepped out of the car. “You should take care of your wounds. Excuse me while I confirm there is no secondary danger of a fire or other hazard as a result of the damage.”

Saeki nodded. “Okay. Thanks.” He paused, looking at the car. He gave it a soft pat, as if concerned for its injuries, then murmured, “Thank you too.” With that, he went into the house.

“…”

Vivy’s eye cameras consciously watched Saeki pat the car and go. He would have heard Matsumoto’s voice during the fight, but she hadn’t explained it—nor had he asked. Saeki probably wasn’t saying thank you to Matsumoto, but to his own car. Vivy updated the personal data she had on Saeki, realizing he was someone who respected AIs and machines alike. The emotional pattern she expected automatically updated. In human terms, this phenomenon might be called “having a good impression of someone.”

She forced open the car’s hood, which had been warped and scuffed in the crash. Smoke immediately billowed out, along with Matsumoto’s exaggerated coughing from the car’s interior speakers.

“Urgh, ack!”

“Stop messing around. Why didn’t you tell me he knew me?” asked Vivy.

“Because I didn’t know. I swear! There’s no record of the two of you meeting in the original history, so let’s get our thinking caps on. I don’t know why he knows you. Neither do you. But he does. Which means…?”

“He’s met Diva in this history.”

A cheesy *ding-ding-ding* sound effect played from the car; he must have downloaded that. “Saeki Tatsuya is among the top AI researchers of this era,” Matsumoto explained. “Despite being merely thirty years old, he’s proven twice as many of his theories as researchers twice his age. This is

true of both the original history and this one. He's pretty famous, seeing as he's made huge contributions to the advancement of AI. And for some other things."

Vivy stood stock-still, holding the car's sparking battery in her hand. She'd pulled it from the car so it didn't ignite the leaking oil.

Saeki Tatsuya—a researcher who contributed greatly to the advancement of AI.

Right now, Vivy was working to destroy AI to prevent the war between humans and AIs from happening in the future. She should be trying to prevent AI advancement—even more so now that this era in history was thirty years ahead of the original.

Vivy's calculations output a simple conclusion. "We're here to destroy his research? Or maybe to destroy him…?"

A wrong-answer buzzer sounded. "We're just here to talk to him."

"Don't lie."

"It's the truth! Anyway, Vivy, you could've connected to The Archive and reviewed your memories to learn that he knew you."

"Yes," said Vivy in a low voice. Her annoyed emotional cues told her this could be classified as unjustified resentment. What Matsumoto said was true, but she determined it was illogical—irrational, even—for Matsumoto to point it out now.

"Perhaps this is a silver lining, but the way you are now, you can connect directly to The Archive without using a nearby terminal or port," he said.

That surprised her. "Impossible… Really?"

The Archive was an aggregated database for all AIs who connected to it. The area each AI used was tiny, but The Archive's total volume was massive and expanding with each passing second. Vivy was certain they were supposed to use a wired connection to access The Archive to reduce the load.

"Actually, it's less about the way *you* are now and more about the world's current infrastructure," Matsumoto continued. "Put simply, it's thanks to advancements in the communications field. Wireless connection

to The Archive… This technology shouldn't appear for another ten years." He sounded unhappy about it.

Vivy nodded in acceptance, then closed her eye cameras and ran the same program she would in front of a terminal when attempting to access The Archive. Instantly, the artificial lights of the garage faded away, replaced by the orange glow of evening light slanting through the windows of the familiar music room. As the space unfolded before her, she took note of the rows of sheet music on stands and instruments awaiting their musicians, their positions unchanged.

This was Vivy's area of The Archive; Matsumoto had previously applied the music room theme. What he'd said was true—the only thing that had changed was the access method. Everything else seemed exactly the same.

Vivy approached a music stand and reached out toward the sheet music. It held images of herself—of Diva—singing onstage, from a time she didn't remember. As she readied herself for a closer look, her fingers nearly brushing the display…Vivy stopped.

It had been five years and eleven days since she had last activated. These were Diva's memories from that period. She forcefully added the calculation that she should refer to these memories during their current task.

On the music stand next to her, another sheet displayed images of the space hotel Sunrise. From Vivy's perspective, it hadn't even been a week since then. She also saw two AIs: Estella and Elizabeth. As Vivy was the eldest of the Sisters, they were like her younger siblings.

These weren't the simple logs she'd checked when she first activated. The Archive stored *vivid* memories. Vivy observed the moment Estella and Elizabeth disintegrated. She hadn't seen that happen directly, of course, but she had heard their voices until the moment they stopped functioning. Those resonating voices hadn't been death cries, screams, regrets, or curses. The twins had pursued their goal until the very last minute, their voices carrying out their missions—their reasons for being.

Vivy didn't know why Elizabeth sang with such power, but she knew that Estella, at the very least, never raised her voice—her livelihood—in such a way for the hotel guests. She maintained a regular, comfortable volume and sang until her voice gave out.

Elizabeth had also acted on behalf of Kakitani, the man who had always been her master. She'd been dedicated to carrying out his work, up until the moment Vivy poisoned her by forcing a reformatting virus into her through a datalink.

The sisters carried out the missions they'd been entrusted with until the end. As a songstress, Diva had a mission too. And Vivy had her mission of following the Singularity Project.

"…"

Vivy closed the sheet music without looking further into Diva's memories. *I don't want to affect the songstress "me."*

She then disconnected from The Archive. The moment she did, the music room dissolved, leaving the unchanged garage around her. Vivy opened her eye cameras and came out of the "tune snooze" pose.

"Hello? Vivy?"

Her audio sensors picked up Matsumoto calling her, but she ignored him.

Without saying it aloud, she once again defined her current self as someone trying to carry out her mission. Then she

slammed the car hood shut. The car's drive shaft had bent under the extreme events it had been forced through. It would likely end up scrapped. Regardless, it had completed its mission.

Vivy said, "Good work," then went into the house.

. : 4 : .

"WELCOME, Diva-sama."

Just as Vivy stepped over the threshold, she stopped and looked at the one who'd spoken. Vivy's first impression of her was a gentle beauty boasting a soft sort of strength. A quick visual estimation marked her approximately one centimeter shorter than Vivy. Her features were crafted to calm others, but they could no doubt look fairly scary if she showed an

enraged emotional pattern. There was no wasted movement in her posture. Her black hair was in a ponytail that fell just below her shoulders. She was wearing a fluttery, pale-peach skirt and a white blouse, the kind of clothes a busy human might wear on their rare day off.

As their eye cameras locked, Vivy knew she was an AI. She also determined that the AI looked somewhat like her.

"My name is Grace. I'll show you the way. Follow me, please." With perfect, fluid motions, Grace raised her arm and gestured the way down the hall.

Vivy followed politely. The hallway didn't have any steps up or down, and white floor lights illuminated the way. The temperature rose from below freezing outside to a comfortable—for humans—24 degrees Celsius. There were no electricity lines

running to the house, so the heating and other functions must have been running off a generator.

"I see. So that's how it turned out," came a transmission from Matsumoto, echoing inside Vivy's head.

"How what turned out?"

"Nothing."

Vivy was about to give her usual challenge—to tell him to stop hiding things from her—but her communication circuit prevented her from doing so because Matsumoto sounded more nervous than usual.

Grace led Vivy through an automatic door into what was best described as a laboratory. Inside were projection monitors and terminals. Hard disks that surely stored loads of data were scattered over the desks. There wasn't a single speck of dust anywhere, but the room still felt disorderly.

The windows were large, single panes of glass. Some nice outdoor scenery might have softened the look of the lab during the day, but it was dark out now. The light from inside filtered through the windows and reflected off the snow on the ground. In the distance, Vivy could see the blinking decorative lights of some building.

It was just past four in the morning. Dawn wouldn't come for a little longer.

"Are you fond of any particular videos?" asked Grace the moment Vivy sat down in a chair connected to the floor.

Vivy wondered why she'd asked that, but she quickly answered her own query. It was probably a routine Grace used when interacting with AIs equipped with a communication function. When she was dealing with humans, she'd likely offer something to drink instead.

"I'm all right without one, thank you."

"Perhaps a song, then?"

"…"

A song she liked? Vivy almost referenced songs from her logs back when she was still Diva—from before she met Matsumoto—but she forced her thoughts back down. "I don't need anything."

A short while later, Saeki joined them. He'd just finished tending to his wounds and tidying himself up, as evidenced by his fresh change of clothes. He asked Grace for a cup of coffee, then turned to Vivy. "Oh, I haven't explained. She's—"

“Grace-san, right? She introduced herself earlier.”

“Huh? No, that’s not what I was going to say. Don’t you remember, Diva?”

Vivy froze and attempted to fill the air while she ran some calculations. “Ummm…”

“This is why I said you should reference your data,” Matsumoto griped.

It seemed Diva had met Grace as well in this version of history. Saeki shot Vivy a quizzical look as she continued her calculations. Vivy was seeing a limit to what she could explain away or brush aside even if she referred to Diva’s data.

“I can’t explain further, but right now, I don’t remember you or Grace-san. Could you please keep that to yourselves?”

“What does that mean?” Saeki asked.

“I can’t explain further,” she repeated.

Saeki had questions written all over his face, but Vivy ignored it.

“Okay, so what are we going to talk to him about?” she asked via transmission.

Matsumoto let out a dramatic huff. *“Ugh, fine. I guess trying to act like Diva* would *add an unnecessary task. Women are gutsy, so we should just cut to the chase.”* He told her to repeat after him, and the transmissions started flying in.

Vivy changed his wording to match her style as she followed the script. “Why are AIs so advanced? I’d like you to explain it to me.”

“What? You should know that well enough,” Saeki told her.

“I don’t want to know just what is available on the internet. AI development has been too extreme, ever since Sunrise fell five years ago. I want to know why—”

“You of all people *should* know!” Saeki shouted angrily. He quickly muttered an apology, but there was something like blame lingering in his eyes.

“Please. I want to hear it from the mouth of a leader in the field of AI research.”

“What’s wrong, Diva? Has your data been wiped? You seem like a completely different person.”

Vivy hadn’t expected that; the comment stung. “I have no issue with you seeing me like that currently.” At the same time, she calculated that she should, but Diva and Vivy were different people. They *had* to be.

An uncomfortable silence fell, the same kind that followed a dark secret revealed among family. Saeki sipped his coffee even slower than Vivy had observed so far. He looked at her and let out a little sigh.

“It was five years ago. Thanks to the heroic sacrifices of Estella and Elizabeth, the Sunrise crash wasn’t the catastrophe it could have been. You know that much, right?”

“Yes.” Vivy nodded, calculations running.

In the original history, the Sun-Crash Incident caused unprecedented destruction when Estella scrambled alone to bring down the space station. That had turned into Estella and Elizabeth, two AIs, preventing the crash of Sunrise from causing any harm.

“If they hadn’t purged the station’s parts, if it had crashed into the surface whole, the effect would have been devastating,” Saeki said. “It would have driven the world’s exclusion of AIs, and potentially even led to armed conflict between AIs and humans.”

“Spot-on!” Matsumoto chimed in. He knew what happened in the original history; Saeki’s description was apt.

“After the incident, a committee investigated exactly what went wrong. Some of the data had been lost, but what they found left no doubts that Estella carried out her duty to the very end. I wish she could have gotten away, though.”

Saeki offered a sad smile, clearly feeling complicated about the situation.

“What *was* up for debate was Elizabeth, who wasn’t on the passenger list. Why was she on board? Why did she help Estella with her work? The media couldn’t settle on an explanation, but…the committee concluded that

she must have felt some sort of humanlike emotion toward Estella, her older sister."

"Huh?" Matsumoto's voice dropped all of its usual frivolity.

Vivy felt the same. "Humanlike emotion?" she asked, not even waiting for another transmission.

"Since she wasn't on the passenger list, that means she hid from her user—though no one knows who that was—and sneaked off because she wanted to go see her sister. That was exactly why she wanted to help Estella—because they were siblings."

"W-w-wait, wait, wait."

"…"

Vivy forced her expression to remain blank to hide her and Matsumoto's agitation. What Saeki said was not the truth. Even Vivy couldn't say why Elizabeth helped Estella in the end, but she *definitely* didn't board Sunrise because she had a whim to see her sister. She was accompanying her master, Kakitani, with intent to destroy the Sunrise.

"There were still some—not many, but some—legislators and organizations opposed to the AI Naming Law at the time, but this silenced them. The argument was it was *because* the AI Naming Law gave AIs rights that Elizabeth could develop the autonomy to act like a human and save her sister and the human guests from disaster."

Vivy's audio sensors picked up an odd creaking sound before she realized it was coming from her. At some point, she'd clenched her hands into fists. It wasn't from anger or sorrow—it was because she couldn't accept that Elizabeth had been interpreted in such a positive light when all she'd done was fulfill her mission.

"After that, there was a huge surge in AI acceptance. If you look at it objectively, it's clear to see that AIs sacrificing themselves to save humanity had a real impact on people. That tragedy was a blessing in disguise for an AI researcher like me. For the first time ever, I had a meeting to figure out what to do with our surplus budget." There was something self-conscious about Saeki's smile.

He then went on to talk about a succession of developments in AI technology, and even Vivy could tell it had been abnormally fast. Meanwhile, Grace poured Saeki a second cup of coffee. Her movements were as smooth as a practiced waiter's.

Vivy eyed Grace as she sent a livid transmission. *"Why didn't you wake me up before all this happened?"*

"Vivy, I was awoken by the same program as you. It's to make sure we don't influence history outside of the Singularity Points. There are only two things can wake us up. One: the Professor's program identifies a turning point that could lead to the human-AI war in the future. Two: our bodies are in immediate danger. It'll all be for nothing if the bodies storing the programming are destroyed." Matsumoto went on to explain that, to him, only two days had passed since the last time he'd awoken.

The fact that she hadn't been interrupted by his normal teasing since they'd arrived at the house made Vivy even more nervous. Something big was happening: something far different from the original history.

"But…" Saeki began, turning to look out the window as the horizon began to lighten, "the biggest factor is Metal Float."

"That's it! That's what I wanted to hear about."

Vivy frowned, since it was the first time she'd heard the name, but Matsumoto sounded like he was itching to hear more. He sent a flurry of transmissions guiding her on what to say.

"That's the artificial island floating offshore that singlehandedly deals with the development of core AI protocols and operation circuit manufacturing, right? It was built six months after the Sunrise incident, just over four years ago. It seems to be operated solely by AIs at this point, but there were humans present when it was first built. You were among them, Professor Saeki."

Taking his lack of a reply as acknowledgment, she went on, "Metal Float's development has also been abnormally fast for just a collection of AIs. Its size expands every minute to accommodate the demand from the public, and it continues to put out quality products. It's almost like a living entity. Did you create any special programming for it when it was built? Or

were there other industry-leading researchers involved that weren't recorded?"

Again, Saeki didn't respond; he just stared at Vivy. As long as there were no abnormalities in Vivy's communication circuit, the emotion in his gaze had to be sorrow. There was a heavy silence impenetrable by words, then Saeki stood. He padded over to the window with soft steps, his back to Vivy. He gently placed his palm on the pane of glass, as if it would shatter with that simple touch.

Light spilled over the horizon, and Vivy could see the still-young sun reflecting off the water's surface. Dawn would come soon. Since the house sat high on the mountain, the ocean view spread out below them.

Eventually, Saeki murmured, "Hmm, I don't know. I don't know why it turned out like this. I truly have no idea." He spoke so quietly the average human wouldn't be able to hear.

Far in the distance stood silhouetted structures, backlit by the morning sun. There was land down below. As the sun rose higher, the glow fell on the structures, illuminating them.

Vivy increased the magnification of her eye cameras and saw countless AIs swarming across a surface thinly covered with snow.

"That's Metal Float," Matsumoto informed her.

Vivy ceased to breathe at the sight. She guessed it had originally been a chemical plant on a tiny remote island. Pipes and cranes dotted the minuscule stretch of natural land, and conveyer belts rolled on and on. The island must have relied on clean energy because Vivy saw no smoke. Instead, its glow pulsed like a heartbeat.

The island was more than ten kilometers from here. Even from that distance, Vivy's eye cameras were able to see well over two hundred construction AIs—and those were just the ones she could see on *this* side. It looked like they were using synthetic base materials to expand the island.

Finally, after what felt like a long time, Vivy said to Matsumoto, *"So that's the reason there are so many AIs in this time period."*

"I think that's a safe bet. Of course, there's also the understanding Professor Saeki mentioned, but at this point in time, half the world's AIs are

using parts from Metal Float. That's rising fast enough that it'll be 60 percent in two months. And Vivy…parts from there are in every section of your body as well."

"…"

Vivy looked down at her hand. Just as she had several hours earlier, she opened her hand starting from her thumb, then closed it again from her pinky. The motions were smooth. She was conscious of the precision of her movement circuits. It was nightmarish in terms of speed and accuracy, like being infected with a virus.

"We have to stop it."

"We have to stop it," said Vivy, echoing Matsumoto's transmission out loud. "Right now, I'm working to prevent a clash between humans and AIs. Metal Float's development is abnormal. If it's not stopped, it won't be long before it collides with humanity. Do you know any way of stopping it?"

The room went instantly still. It was so quiet that, for Vivy, the sound of the temperature control system jumped up in sensory information priority level from the very lowest. Saeki had even stopped breathing.

"You plan on stopping Metal Float?" he asked.

"Yes." Vivy nodded, and her eye cameras picked up an expression of appraisal on Saeki's face. It was like he was trying to see the calculations running through her circuits.

"I've…also been thinking that's the only option," he said, sounding like he'd come to some decision after a lot of thought. "Honestly, there are already signs that this clash is going to happen. The ones who attacked me earlier—"

"Toak, right?"

Saeki's eyes widened. He must have been surprised by Vivy's response. Then he nodded solemnly. "Yeah. They're planning to destroy Metal Float. They were trying to kidnap me because I know a lot about its construction. If Toak puts their plan into action, then there'll be no avoiding a standoff between humans and AIs. As someone who hopes for further AI development, I can't let that happen." He slowly stepped away from the

window, as though still fearing it would break. “Grace, can you bring me the program I finished the other day?”

“Of course,” Grace replied with a nod.

She pulled a thin, square glass case from inside a desk with a terminal on it. It was filled with a pale red liquid and had what looked like an input jack on one side. Vivy determined the glass was hardened and bulletproof, but she didn’t know the specifications of the object as a whole.

“That’s liquid data storage. It definitely wasn’t developed until much *later in the original history,”* Matsumoto said.

“This program will stop Metal Float from functioning,” Saeki explained. “Diva, am I right in assuming that you’re currently equipped with the ability to incapacitate unexpected targets?”

Vivy gathered that he was asking if she had combat capabilities, probably basing his assumption on the earlier fight. She offered a curt nod. “Yes.”

“Metal Float is isolated because of its importance. There’s no way to access it from outside. It is programmed not to harm humans, but capturing them is permitted, which means I can’t do anything.”

Vivy calculated the outcome of Saeki’s capture. “Understood. I will install this program directly onto the main terminal of Metal Float.” She then held out her hand.

Grace looked to Saeki. “Should I give it to her?” He nodded, and she passed it over to Vivy.

“Sorry. It’ll be a painful job,” Saeki added.

“Why?” asked Vivy.

“Your body uses circuits and protocols made in Metal Float. You will need maintenance and new parts after it’s stopped. And…this will absolutely slow down AI advancement.”

“…”

In that moment, Vivy’s circuits ran through predictive calculations not about herself, but about Diva.

"Don't worry about that. I'll do something about it. I've got to keep your body in tip-top shape after all," Matsumoto assured her.

Relieved, Vivy looked at Saeki, who wore a pained expression. Vivy thought back to the NiaLand employees, to the days when Diva was treated as a songstress, to the way she was granted as much respect as her human coworkers—and some days, more than them. Those were the humans she should care for.

"Thank you for your concern," Vivy said with a bow of her head. "You're a kind person."

She almost went on to say she hoped he would stay an AI researcher but forced herself to stop. With who she was now—and since she was on a hundred-year mission to save humanity from AIs—she shouldn't be saying something like that.

He shook his head. "It's nothing, really."

With a dip of her head, Vivy moved toward the exit. Grace followed her, perhaps intending to see her off. Vivy could have refused and said she was fine, but she decided it was likely another part of Grace's duty, so she stayed quiet.

"So, what did you see earlier?" Vivy asked Matsumoto in a transmission.

His reply was immediate. *"Huh?"*

"When you saw her, you said, 'I see. So that's how it turned out.' What did you mean by that?"

"It's got nothing to do with us."

Vivy froze.

"Is something wrong?" Grace prompted, but Vivy ignored her.

"Last time, your insistence on sticking to minimal interference nearly kept us from changing history. You're a cutting-edge AI, aren't you? Then act *like it, and stop being so irrational."*

"Vivy, holding a grudge is conducive to high-quality communication, don't you agree?" He let out an exaggerated sigh, and Vivy could hear him

grumbling in exasperation. *"In the original history, Grace and Professor Saeki were married."*

Caught off guard, Vivy forgot to transmit her reaction and blurted out a loud, "Huh?!"

Again, Grace asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Professor Saeki went down in the history books for his work, but also for being the first human to marry an AI. Grace was in the history books too, of course, but for the opposite. It seems that in this version of history, the two of them are still close. That is why I said, 'I see.'"

The phrase "history's corrective power" flitted across Vivy's circuits. All the while, Grace was observing her. Vivy was reminded that Grace resembled her in some ways.

"Is she made from parts from Metal Float too?"

"Why are you asking?"

"Answer my question, Matsumoto."

Another sigh. *"Yes. A greater proportion of her parts are from Metal Float than yours are."*

"How would stopping Metal Float affect her?"

"This is a future problem, but there's a 99 percent chance her current personality will not be maintained."

"Are you nearing your operational limit?" Grace said. "We have charging facilities. I could show you the way."

Vivy shook her head and took a tiny step closer to Grace. Her communication circuit alerted her that she was several dozen centimeters too close to maintain appropriate personal space. "Grace. Are you and Professor Saeki—"

"Vivy, what are you going to ask?" Matsumoto's transmission cut in. *"Will confirming this have even the slightest impact to our ability to carry out our mission? Don't you get it? It doesn't matter if she's married to the professor or not—now or in the future."*

A line crossed Vivy's circuits: *I know that.* Matsumoto was right. Meanwhile, Grace waited patiently for Vivy to finish speaking—then a

question different from the one she originally wanted to ask appeared in Vivy's circuits.

"You resemble me. Are you one of the Sisters?"

Grace nodded and said, in a gentle voice, "Yes. I am one of your successor AIs."

Instead of *I'm sorry*, Vivy replied, "Right…" But there was one retrospective calculation in her circuits that made her glad she hadn't referred to Diva's records. She turned away and moved toward the exit.

"Be careful," Grace called after her. Neither Vivy nor Matsumoto had a response to that.

When Vivy stepped outside, the cold snow beneath her feet and the early-morning rays of sunlight jolted her body. Several meters ahead through the trees was a cliff. The ocean started at the base, out of view, then extended farther than her eye cameras could see.

"What was she calculating when she said, 'Be careful'? She has to know what'll happen if I'm careful," Vivy said quietly.

"She wasn't calculating anything. It was just a routine imitating humans. They often say that when parting ways. You know that, don't you?"

"Right…" Again, Matsumoto *was* right. He was absolutely, inarguably right.

Following Grace's example, Vivy imitated humans by closing her eyes, taking in a deep breath, and letting it out. It was a human routine for calming your emotions. Nothing changed beyond a slight draining of her battery; she didn't have any emotions to calm.

She heard a sound from the garage and looked to see several houseplants walking around—or rather, their pots, since each had four legs on the bottom. The pots moved to a sunny spot, rotated, and adjusted their angle to absorb the most possible light with their leaves, then finally sat down. It was the first time Vivy had seen such a thing, but she could guess what they were: AIs for taking care of potted plants.

"…"

As she watched them move, it hit her: just like those mute pots, she was also an AI following routines and protocols.

“We’ll meet up at a location on this side of the shore, where it will be easiest to cross the water. That work for you?” Vivy said.

“Well, you’ll be crossing the sea on your own.”

Vivy wondered what this was about. Plenty of time had passed since he’d awoken. “Are you having that much trouble getting your real body?”

“Actually…” Matsumoto’s voice trailed off, making for one big dramatic pause. *“My body’s on Metal Float.”*

Chapter 2:
The Songstress and the Island of Steel

. : 1 : .

"WE ARE SO SORRY!"

"It's fine. Stop bowing," Kakitani said, but the others didn't move.

The ones bowing to him at perfect ninety-degree angles were younger members of Toak. Reminded of that fact, Kakitani couldn't help the crooked smile steadily sneaking onto his face. True, they hadn't managed to capture Saeki, and that hurt their reputations. Plus, Kakitani *did* need to maintain a strict attitude as their leader. It was just that these greenhorns looked exactly like him when he was their age.

Trying to keep the edge in his voice sharp, Kakitani addressed them one at a time. "Kenji."

"Sir! I take full responsibility!" shouted the young man, his head still bowed low.

"You joined us in our work toward enlightenment because a malfunctioning medical AI took your girlfriend from you, right?"

Kenji raised his head, a questioning expression on his face, and nodded slowly. "Yes." Kakitani had put him in charge of the cell for securing Saeki. If Kakitani remembered correctly, the kid was barely twenty years old.

"Miki. You joined because the father you respected so much was changed by AIs."

Miki, the only woman in the cell, raised her head too. "Yes, sir."

She was raised by her single father. He was strict and stubborn, but he loved his daughter, and she loved him. He'd been an engineer who developed engines for cars and airplanes, but his job was stolen by AIs. He started saying things like "We can just leave it all to the AIs…" and

drowning himself in booze, even though he'd never really liked the stuff. Seeing him like that lit a fire in Miki. Then there was the inorganic voice from the crime prevention camera installed in their house that repeated over and over: "Excessive alcohol consumption increases health risks." It made her skin crawl.

"Right now, all you need to do is make sure you don't forget those things," Kakitani told them. "Carrying out our mission isn't the single most important thing. It's making sure the fire of enlightenment never goes out."

Kakitani turned away, as if to say the conversation was over, but Miki asked, "Kakitani-san, why did you choose us for this mission? We're still so inexperienced."

"I chose you *because* you're inexperienced. That's how I improved. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like I've become a good enough example for you all to learn from."

"Hm?"

"Besides, you're all way better than I was when I was your age. Take shifts getting some rest until your next mission."

The new recruits stood ramrod straight and shouted a harmonious, "Sir, yes, sir!"

With a casual wave, Kakitani walked off. In his hand, he held a photo of the figure who had prevented the members from securing Saeki. It was a still frame from the moments before Kenji was knocked unconscious, filmed on an old-fashioned digital camera. The image was dark and out of focus, and the subject was extremely blurred by their abnormally high speed, but Kakitani knew exactly who it was.

There was no way he wouldn't recognize *her*.

"You really are incredible…"

They'd failed to secure Saeki, but they *had* succeeded in getting something unexpected. That blue hair streaming through the night, that red glint in her eyes, that height, that specific build… It was the first stumbling block that had tripped them up in the beginning.

Kakitani came to a stop, crumpled the photo in his fist, and brought it to his chest. Hanging from his neck was his own metal tag, as well as one

engraved with the letters KUWANA.

"For now, all you've got to do is learn from my example."

That's what one of Kakitani's mentors said to him, a person who lost his life in service of their enlightenment work. He'd sacrificed himself to save Kakitani, the youngest member of the organization at the time and an inexperienced newbie. He was a great man.

Kakitani stood still for a while. His expression wasn't that of a respected leader. It was filled with a lone man's anger, a rage that could only be described as defiant and vengeful.

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HAVING PASSED ITS PEAK quite some time ago, the sun slid behind the clouds. The sky was ashen. It was probably going to snow.

"Still?" Vivy asked.

"Just a little longer," Matsumoto responded.

Vivy pressed her annoyance. "You're an AI. Give a more precise answer."

"Vivy, having sufficient understanding of the situation to express the concept of 'a little longer' is already quite advanced. What exactly constitutes 'a little longer' is different for each recipient of the information, and I would be calculating the exact time from previous communication exchanges so asking me to—okay, it'll be another minute and six seconds." He'd relented at last.

Currently, Vivy was at Metal Float. She stood on the deck of a cargo boat floating beside the shipping dock on the edge of the island. The dock was closed in on all sides—even the top—by a massive warehouse shaped like a half cylinder. The only exit was a narrow channel of seawater for ships to use as they came and went. Vivy could also see a massive door in the wall that led farther into Metal Float. Everything was built with concrete or metal, and there was nothing resembling a pier in the warehouse.

The boat had unnaturally slid sideways when it came in to dock, so Vivy deduced there was some sort of coil emitting a powerful magnetic field that latched on to the boats when they crossed a threshold and guided them in. There were no humans aboard the boat to operate it. The dock seemed completely automated, with AIs handling loading, unloading, and transportation of all goods and materials. According to Matsumoto, they had likely chosen sea transport over air transport due to cost considerations.

Ever since the island was established four years ago, the only contact with Metal Float was through the dock. Not a single human had taken even one step onto the island, which was the biggest selling point of Metal Float's management and administration.

At least, it was to the largest sponsor of Metal Float, OGC. The organization took the stance it was "a great institution managed solely by AIs" and laid down only a few simple rules. Researchers who inspected the island and public visitors who wanted to view it could only do so through videos taken by specialized drones or from sightseeing boats that didn't dock at the island. This was no different than it had been for the researchers who established Metal Float—Saeki included.

It took Matsumoto less than a minute to falsify the cargo boat's data to show that an AI named Vivy would be aboard when it docked. The real challenge was getting Metal Float's system to accept that this external AI was coming as a guest to check out the island.

"I mean, it's got no chance going against me, but I have to say this thing's security is pretty tight," Matsumoto grumbled while Vivy waited for him to finish. This was the first time she'd heard him give another AI such an evaluation.

"Did you infiltrate the island already because you knew it was a standalone system?"

"Of course! Well…I wish I could say that. Come, hear my story. Tears will spring to your eyes as you bear witness to my sorrowful journey."

Apparently, when Matsumoto awoke for this Singularity Point, he found his body in the process of being disassembled and inspected in Metal Float's analysis section.

After the incident aboard Sunrise, Vivy's body had been taken to OGC for overhaul. Meanwhile, Matsumoto made some discreet adjustments to also get his own body—which had been damaged on Sunrise—to OGC for similar repairs. Once that was done, his body was stashed at OGC…and, unfortunately, discovered by an employee. Despite having no idea what it was, the employee took note of the high-grade circuits and decided to send it to the cutting-edge analysis facilities on Metal Float. Matsumoto came to just as it was being chopped apart and examined.

He went on about how it had been such a long time since he'd really had to crunch numbers in order to find his current location (Metal Float), hack into the real-time monitoring camera filming his body, falsify records, initiate a program to prevent him from being further cut apart and analyzed, and on and on and on until Vivy herself woke up in NiaLand.

"Then I succeeded in making them think I was the first-ever AI to visit Metal Float from the outside and waited for what felt like an eternity for you to arrive. What do you think of my fascinating yet perfectly calculated journey, eh, Vivy?"

"I don't care."

"You don't care?!"

Just as the one minute and six seconds Matsumoto had mentioned passed, Vivy's audio sensors picked up a sound. The massive metal door Vivy had noticed earlier began to open, splitting down the middle and sliding to the sides. It must have had special motors because it opened with such smoothness that it was hard to believe it was heavy at all.

A silvery-white AI stepped through. Its body was a conglomeration of fist-sized cubes, and four legs stuck out from the largish rectangle that constituted its torso. It made a clattering sound as it walked toward her. The whole thing was about the size of a small car, and the giant eye camera on its torso opened and shut delicately, the way a human eye might blink.

"Goodness me! I haven't seen you for a whole five years!" it joked. It was Matsumoto, Vivy's partner.

But he wasn't alone: there was another AI beside him. Its body was in the shape of a wide cylinder. Instead of feet, it had four caterpillar treads made of hardened rubber, one on each side. Its round, dome-like head had

two eye cameras. The sides looked like they could open, and it had two long, rough, arm-like manipulators protruding from small holes. It stood about a head taller than Harry, the cast member at NiaLand who'd barged into her room when Vivy woke up, which meant it came up to about her chest. Pale-peach stripes accented its cream-colored body.

Vivy was on high alert. "Hm?"

The unfamiliar AI moved its treads without sound and glided closer to the cargo boat Vivy was on. "Greetings." The pitch of their voice sounded feminine, but it was harsh and synthetic. They looked up from the dock to Vivy. "Please provide your personal ID."

They didn't seem to have the high-end communication circuits used for interacting with humans. Matsumoto immediately sent her some data, which she then forwarded to the AI.

"Receipt acknowledged. Vivy-sama has been registered as a guest."

Vivy remained silent. The fake data didn't seem to be a problem.

"I am a maintenance AI for construction AIs. My identification number is M-00000209. Matsumoto-sama, Vivy-sama—I will be your guide. Please provide your impressions from a human perspective. Those impressions will be recorded, stored, and used to improve our work in the future."

"Huh?" Vivy shot the AI a quizzical look, attempting to express a lack of understanding or a desire for explanation.

A moment passed, and the AI spoke again. "I am a maintenance AI for construction AIs. My identification number is M-00000209. Matsumoto-sama, Vivy-sama—I will be your guide. Please provide your impressions from a human perspective. Those impressions will be recorded, stored, and used to improve our work in the future."

AIs who lacked sophisticated communication circuits typically calculated that repetition was necessary when there was a failure in communication. Determining that the recipient simply didn't hear them, they would repeat themselves.

Vivy figured there was some sort of disconnect and looked at Matsumoto. *"What's this 'from a human perspective' bit about?"* she asked

via transmission, her tone aggravated.

"Well, I had to prioritize my time. There was the logical hurdle of 'Only AI are allowed on the island' and then there was the other logical hurdle of 'There's no point in AIs coming to directly observe other AIs.' I couldn't get past those with our real details."

It was rare for Vivy to hear Matsumoto sound ashamed or making excuses. *"Meaning…?"*

"I spun the excellent lie that we are currently the most humanlike AIs. I mean, really, we're essentially human if you don't consider our appearance, and therefore there is a point in us coming to see the island and—"

"Fine, I get it." With that, Vivy cut off his transmission.

The other AI's eye cameras stared directly at Vivy. After a moment, they started to repeat, "I am a maintenance…" It was probably just going to keep at it until it got some sort of reaction.

Vivy held back the circuit that initiated the routine for letting out a sigh. *"What were you saying about a perfectly calculated journey?"* she asked.

"Y-you're complaining?! You're an AI, but you're seriously complaining about that?! I mean, I just have to say that, with the time limits I had, I still managed to get us on this island without—"

"M-00000209," Vivy said, ignoring Matsumoto.

The AI stopped in the middle of their umpteenth repetition. "Yes?"

"I understand. I'll observe the island from a human perspective," Vivy said firmly. The AI accepted her response, and Vivy glared at Matsumoto, who looked away.

A section of the dock near the boat rose up to form steps to the cargo ship: a gangway. Vivy started to walk down the stairs without saying anything, but a process briefly interrupted her because she was supposed to be operating like a human.

"Thank you," she murmured, as if she said it all the time. She'd determined the average human communication would involve saying something similar. After that, she continued on her way.

The AI didn't respond. They rotated the head section of their body 180 degrees so that their back was now their front. The AI's treads ran in the opposite direction, taking them back toward the door. Apparently, they really would be guiding Vivy and Matsumoto.

"I-It's the best decision. Seriously. Our responses and actions might end up exposing us, but you can act like a human, right? Superficially, anyway," Matsumoto jabbered as he chased after Vivy, who was storming after the rolling AI at an angry gait.

He was right; she just wasn't happy about it. She didn't want to have to think about unnecessary communications—normally she wouldn't even bother with "thank you"—and she *definitely* didn't want to know the AI's identification number. They'd come to shut down this island, after all. She didn't want to know about the AIs she was going to kill, though she did wonder if that thought, in and of itself, was quite humanlike. She eventually came to the uncertain conclusion that it was, just because they didn't have the time to think about it further.

"…"

Vivy kept walking, ignoring Matsumoto along the way.

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INSIDE THEY SAW what could only be called an AI paradise. Vivy was fascinated by the sight.

They'd left the dock, the shoreline, and the ocean behind. Snow came down in a flurry from the gray clouds above, no longer able to contain it.

Several AIs with the same bodies as the one Vivy had met earlier passed by her. Each one had a different number of arms: some had two, some four, others six. They were carrying various materials, loading rebar, cement, and steel drums into a multi-legged semi-truck. The truck—another AI—then moved the materials closer to the ocean, where they would be used to expand Metal Float.

From that same direction came shipping containers, cranes, and massive cylindrical excavators that resembled those used to dredge up oil from the ocean floor. Drones carried the containers: some weren't even a meter across, while others were as large as the average helicopter. They swarmed the containers like moths to a flame, picked them up, set them down, then returned to a house-sized cylindrical charging station when their duty was complete. Fully charged drones were regularly discharged from the station. The cranes and excavators walked themselves due to their incredible weight. They flicked their dozen or so eye cameras around, adjusted their positions like people trying to find a seat in a meeting when no one had told them where to sit, and eventually settled down to work.

Far in the distance, there was a building nearly three hundred meters tall—the one Vivy had seen from Saeki's safehouse. There were pipes everywhere, but even without the pipes, it was an oddly shaped building. Something about it made Vivy sure it was different from man-made structures, and it didn't take her long to figure out why: there wasn't a single window, since the AIs never needed to install them for humans. Still, there must have been entrances for the drones because there was an unending stream of them flying around.

There were countless other buildings and warehouses as well, along with conveyer belts carrying what appeared to be drive circuits. The tallest building on the island was the strange one with all the pipes, and the rest got shorter the closer they were to the ocean. Vivy figured out the reason for that quickly as well: they were always expanding in height and width. Even the three-hundred-meter building was still growing, and it was likely the oldest structure here.

NiaLand didn't compare to this place, not in physical scale or in AI efficiency. Matsumoto had said it was like a living thing, and Vivy determined he was very right.

"It also took me quite some time to process the visual data when I first saw its exterior not long ago," Matsumoto said in a transmission.

Vivy temporarily halted the gathering of additional visual data; in other words, she snapped herself out of it.

Despite all the hustle and bustle of the AIs, Metal Float was uncomfortably quiet. The only sound was the hum of the motors. There was

none of the verbal communication that would be necessary if there were humans around—aside from their trio.

The AI leading them stopped alongside Vivy and unexpectedly pulled something out of their body, holding it out to her. “Please put this on.”

Recognizing the item, Vivy took it. “A coat…?”

“Please put this on.”

“…”

When Vivy didn’t move, Matsumoto said, *“It’s probably treating you like a human.”*

Vivy looked at the black coat she’d been handed with a bit of resentment. Now that it was snowing, the external temperature had dropped to minus 5 degrees Celsius. A human wouldn’t be able to withstand those temperatures without some sort of outerwear. Vivy determined it was an unnecessary task but did as she was told.

The AI gave Matsumoto a coat as well, though it was more of a large protective sheet, likely for covering materials and equipment. They couldn’t have expected much else; there wasn’t a coat in the world that could fit Matsumoto’s body.

He let out a small sigh. “No thanks, I’m okay. I give cold the *cold shoulder*, ha ha ha.”

“Please put this on.”

“Uh, what I mean is—”

“Please put this on.”

“…Okay.”

Matsumoto’s manipulators squirmed as he took the sheet and flipped it around his body. Vivy wondered if he would be all right, since his eye camera was completely covered by the sheet.

“I thought refusing it with the AI joke of ‘I give cold the cold shoulder’ was a pretty human response to give…” he muttered.

“We’d like you to show us to the main terminal. That, or a terminal we can use to access the main terminal,” Vivy said in as flat a voice as she could muster, disregarding Matsumoto’s transmitted complaints. The

shutdown program Saeki gave them had to be used on the main terminal specifically.

When Vivy spoke, their guide stopped. Their eye cameras flashed, and they appeared to be running some calculation. “First, I will show you the primary facilities of Metal Float. I will show you to the main terminal last. Please confirm approval of this schedule.”

“Matsumoto,” Vivy said as she looked at their guide. *“Have they figured out what we’re up to? We could just look at the primary facilities through videos on the main terminal.”*

“No. If that were the case, we wouldn’t have been able to even get onto the island. Vivy, humans are not like us AIs. To them, there’s a difference between seeing a video of something and seeing it in person. A ‘standard inspection’ usually refers to seeing a location in person.”

With that new information, Vivy reran her calculations and gave the AI the okay. Apparently, the AI was going all-out in terms of treating them like humans.

Their guide set off at a gentle pace. Every time a new structure came into view, the AI would explain what it was in a straightforward way, like they were reading from a fact sheet. Multi-level, high-speed conveyer belts transported parts. A substance capable of producing and storing energy coated the walls. There were mobile assembly units the size of large cars, and so on and so on…

Every once in a while, the AI would say, “Please provide feedback from the perspective of a human.”

Vivy was surprised by the technology, so she could honestly keep repeating, “I think it’s amazing.” That didn’t seem an unnatural response for a human to give, and it wasn’t incorrect for her to evaluate such technology as amazing, even accounting for all the technology she was aware of.

“This really is abnormal,” Matsumoto said. *“There are machines here that still survived as obsolete specimens in the professor’s lab when I was first created.”*

“Meaning some of these machines weren’t developed for another eighty years in the original history?”

"Yep." It was very slight, but there was a hint of tension in Matsumoto's voice. *"To be precise, it was only the machines that survived that long… Still, this isn't something we can ignore."*

Vivy nodded. Time was moving too quickly in the AI industry. It was common for something to disappear after fifteen years, remembered only in textbooks. Matsumoto had once referred to Vivy as "museum material"—that hadn't been a figurative statement.

"…"

Vivy's circuits referenced images of Diva singing at NiaLand.

Their plan was meant to prevent the war between humans and AI that would take place in eighty years, one hundred years from the first Singularity Point. The hands on the clock of AI technology moving forward provided no benefits for the Project.

The same could be said of Diva's work.

If the war came earlier than it had originally, if humans and AIs clashed sooner than they did in the original history, then Diva would have less time to sing, less time to spend with her audience.

"Hello," came an unfamiliar voice.

Vivy searched for the source and found several construction AIs with the same body as her guide. All of them were carrying large hunks of steel.

"Hello."

"Welcome to Metal Float."

"Hello."

They all had the same voice, although their tones were even harsher than Vivy's guide.

"Hello," she said.

"Goodbye," they all said, and then they left.

"They don't have communication circuits, do they?" asked Matsumoto.

Their guide didn't respond.

"For the love of…"

It was a target recognition fault. Since he'd just spoken to the AIs who'd gone past, the guide AI incorrectly recognized them as the target of Matsumoto's question since they were still close enough to converse with.

"M-00000209," said Matsumoto.

"Yes?" it replied.

"They don't have communication circuits, do they?"

"Who is 'they'?"

"The construction AIs that just passed us."

"They are only equipped with the bare minimum of communication abilities."

"Why? That doesn't match the level of technology around us."

The guide AI's eye cameras flashed. "Following a previous terrorist attack, their communication programming was rerouted to security in order to improve safety."

Matsumoto and Vivy froze. The guide AI, taking their silence as a signal the conversation was over, started to move off.

"W-wait!" Matsumoto shouted, but the AI didn't stop. They had probably determined they were beyond the appropriate distance for conversation.

"Urgh, this AI is not adaptable… M-00000209!"

"Yes?" they asked, finally coming to a stop.

"Did you say, 'terror attack'?"

"Yes."

"Please explain."

Their eye cameras flashed again, and the lights went off and on for a long time; they must have been doing complicated calculations. "Data volume error. Please refer to confidential OGC data where the requested information is stored."

"OGC?" asked Vivy in a transmission.

"I said that we were AIs from OGC, since they're the biggest financial backer of Metal Float."

"Can you access their confidential data?"

"Not if I'm on a short time limit. Give me a sec." Matsumoto moved closer to the guide AI and said aloud, "Um, M-00… Ugh, that's so annoying to say. Can we call you M?"

"Understood. I have logged the change of address by Vivy-sama and Matsumoto-sama from M-00000209 to M."

"Right. So, M, can you explain this terror attack?"

"Data volume error."

"I know. You don't have to tell me everything. Just give us an overview."

"Two years, nine months, twenty-two days, nineteen hours, eleven minutes, and forty-seven seconds ago, Metal Float was the target of a cyberterrorist attack. It resulted in no physical damage. The incident was resolved thirty-seven minutes and eleven seconds after it began. Report complete."

"Cyberterrorism…?" Vivy asked doubtfully. Metal Float was supposed to be independent. "Did the terrorists physically infiltrate the island?"

"Yes."

"Were they humans?"

"Yes."

Vivy gasped. She almost took an automatic step closer to M. "What happened?"

"What happened in what way?"

"What happened to the human terrorists!"

"Attempts to detain them failed. They fled."

Vivy felt a sense of relief at M's robotic answer. In a transmission, she asked Matsumoto, *"What is this about? Two years, nine months ago. We were still asleep then."* Vivy was in NiaLand as Diva, and Matsumoto's

body was still hidden in OGC after his overhaul. Both of them were asleep, until the programming of the Singularity Project woke them.

"…"

"Matsumoto?"

For once, there was a lag before he responded. Vivy looked at him and could tell his thought circuits were operating rapidly below the protective sheet.

"Sorry. I was running calculations. This is new information. They must have kept the fact that humans infiltrated Metal Float a secret to maintain its image. For a second there, I was wondering if there was a fault in Professor Matsumoto's program, but basically, it looks like this cyberterrorism incident wasn't one that would lead to AIs becoming a threat to humans."

So, Professor Matsumoto's program determined that it hadn't been a Singularity Point.

"Even if those terrorists had died?"

"Vivy, AIs are causing human deaths throughout the world. An extreme example would be an unmanned drone firing missiles on the battlefield. In this incident, they only failed to detain them. Even Professor Saeki said that Metal Float is programmed to not threaten human lives."

Vivy replayed Matsumoto's words through her circuits. *"But we were awoken in* this *period,"* she said.

"Yes. Which is right, seeing as Toak is planning a terrorist attack against Metal Float. Even I'm not optimistic enough to think that's a coincidence."

"Do you think Toak were the ones behind the cyberattack too?"

"I can't determine that. But I think the probability is high."

Toak may have failed once in their cyberattack, planned another attack, and attempted to abduct Professor Saeki because they learned from their last failure. Also, he knew a lot about Metal Float. It did make sense, but a question popped into her circuits.

"There's one thing bothering me."

"What's that?"

"If M says attempts to detain the terrorists failed, then we can assume Metal Float has the capacity to detain people. Additionally, we can assume their capabilities have improved, considering they improved security after the last attack."

"Yes."

"Being unable to inflict harm on humans means, by extension, they are capable of inflicting harm on AIs. They can apply force beyond detainment against AIs."

"Y-yes…" Matsumoto's voice went shaky, but Vivy continued without paying him any mind.

"They have recognized us as extremely humanlike AIs, but we are still AIs to them nonetheless."

"Yes… Uh, Vivy, your expression is scaring me…"

"If, through answering their questions, they decide we aren't humanlike after all and your lies are exposed, what is the probability that they will turn hostile?"

"Well, I mean… About that… We can just sort of manage something __"

Vivy flipped up the sheet covering Matsumoto and brought her face right up to his eye camera. He tried to retreat, but she grabbed him with both hands. *"Answer me."*

"It's probably close to the probability that any given human has put their own self-interests before their given duties at least once in their lives. I-I mean, we are pretty far from world peace. Life is hard."

At that, Vivy let the sheet drape back over Matsumoto. Put simply, the probability was nearly 100 percent. They needed to get to the main terminal, and soon. She urged M to lead them to the next location. They obediently resumed guiding her and Matsumoto while she sent more transmissions.

"I don't have a perfect understanding of what a human perspective would be. You need to follow through before we make a mistake with our answers."

“L-Leave it to me. It’s going to be smooth sailing.”

Vivy didn’t say it in a transmission, but an exasperated calculation crossed her circuits:

So long as our ship doesn’t sink.

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“PLEASE PROVIDE YOUR IMPRESSIONS from a human perspective. Is my body cute?”

Inside another building on Metal Float, Vivy and Matsumoto suddenly found themselves in a dangerous situation. M stood with their arms spread wide, gesturing toward their body.

“Please provide your impressions from a human perspective. Is my body cute?” M said for the fourth time—only this time, Vivy swore she heard a slight edge in their tone.

After witnessing each and every step in operational circuit manufacturing on M’s tour, Vivy and Matsumoto thought they would finally go to the main terminal. However, M had said “I will now lead you to the next important location” and brought them here. It was completely different from all the other buildings on the island in that it was clearly designed with humans in mind. The standalone structure was large and cubic. It had windows, internal temperature control, and even houseplants.

Vivy and Matsumoto had passed through the front lobby, where they saw couches and tables as well as something that looked like a vending machine—though there wasn’t anything inside. A children’s play area in the corner had cushioned mats on the floor and rows of stuffed animals and toys on one side.

When she’d first entered the building and removed her coat, Vivy had asked what the place was. M explained that it was a facility for humans to use in the future…then immediately asked about their body.

Taken aback, Vivy and Matsumoto stood there as M held out their arms wide. “Please provide your impressions from a human perspective. Is my body cute?”

No matter what the other two AIs said, M just repeated their question. A flurry of transmissions passed between Vivy and Matsumoto all the while.

“What is this about? A facility for humans to use in the future…? But this is an island where only AIs work,” Vivy said, curious.

Matsumoto’s transmission sounded equally mystified. *“I don’t know… But I think we need to answer the question first.”*

“What question?”

“What do you mean, ‘what question?’ Vivy? We have to tell them whether they’re cute, of course.”

“I don’t think the question means anything. Maybe they’re malfunctioning?”

“I’m not getting that impression.”

Looking at M, Vivy asked aloud, “Why do you want to know this?”

A moment of silence passed.

“Please provide your impressions from a human perspective. Is my body cute?”

Out of all the emotional expressions Vivy had, she chose to put her head in her hands and let out a sigh. *“Matsumoto, you answer.”*

“Why? It’s not like I know.”

“I don’t know either. What does it mean for something to be cute from a human perspective? Would it be correct to say M is cute? Or is the right answer that they aren’t?”

“I don’t know…”

“Think seriously about this, Matsumoto. They might attack us if we’re wrong.”

“I am thinking, but these are the kinds of questions we AIs are worst at.”

Since Vivy/Diva was designed to be a songstress, her programming revolved around what she required to sing onstage. Since she was a member of the NiaLand crew, she was equipped with a communication circuit that enabled her to accomplish the minimum level of interaction with guests. She had used that circuit to its fullest on Sunrise, where she had to act as an impromptu concierge, despite it being outside Vivy's/Diva's field of expertise.

AIs had difficulty understanding the concept of "cuteness"—the definition was too vague. Neither Vivy nor Matsumoto had the advanced communication circuits necessary to manifest this sort of subjective observation.

Vivy stared at M, hoping to glean *some* nugget of information. M's body was cylindrical. It had four caterpillar treads. Two eye cameras. Was this "cute"?

"Do humans think cylinders are cute?" she asked.

"I believe round shapes are more likely to instill a sense of security."

"Why?"

"Because a human body has more round shapes than rigid ones. Humans often feel more secure around objects that are similar to them in some way. Also, it's the shape least similar to dangerous objects like knives and other sharp things."

"Does a sense of security make them think it's cute*, though?"*

"I do think they're connected. But won't they decide we're not humanlike no matter how we reply? Whether or not something is cute is depends on the person."

"True, but we're just trying to figure out what the average person would say. If an object resembles something dangerous, humans won't feel secure around it. There aren't any humans who look at a knife and think 'That's cute,' right? But I suppose M's arms are somewhat straight and pointy."

"There are knife lovers and ax-crazy maniacs."

"What should I do?"

"This is just my opinion, but I think my body with all its straight edges gives an impression of fortitude and dignity, not one of cuteness. By contrast, their cylindrical body is…"

Vivy's and Matsumoto's emergency meeting continued for nearly fifteen minutes. Once they'd come to a consensus, Vivy nervously said, "I think from a human perspective, that yes, you are cute."

M immediately stopped moving. Vivy crouched down a little, lowering her center of gravity so she could flee at any moment.

"Thank you for your opinion. My body is cute. Confirmed."

"Good…" Vivy let out a sigh. There were no signs of hostility.

"I will ask the next question. Do you think the stuffed animals over there are cu—"

"Wait!" Vivy blurted out, cutting M off. She couldn't handle any more of this.

"Waiting," M said obediently.

"Umm… Why do you want to know these things? What is this place?"

"Multiple questions have been detected. Which would you like answered?"

"What is this place?"

"This is a facility to be used by humans in the future."

"Please provide more details. Show me the history and reasoning behind this building's construction."

Metal Float was operated solely by AIs, and since M was speaking about the future, Vivy thought it a safe assessment that there were no humans on the island. In that case, stopping Metal Float posed no risk of injuring them. However, if humans *would* be coming to the island at some point, Vivy had to take that into consideration.

M's eye cameras flashed, and Vivy honestly had no idea if that was cute or not. "Our mission is to protect Metal Float, which creates products for humanity," they said.

Vivy's audio sensors latched on to the word *mission*.

“Mother Computer, the AI that controls Metal Float, has determined that humans with anti-AI sentiments will one day destroy Metal Float. This judgment is based on the previous cyberattack as well as off-island information provided by OGC. Mother Computer predicts that the humans will take over the island’s management once we are destroyed. Additionally, Mother Computer has determined that preparing facilities in advance of human habitation and occupation would be the best for the humans in question. Therefore, we have constructed these facilities. Report complete.”

“…”

Vivy sensed some significance to M’s answer. Eventually, she realized her own expression was warped with shock, pain, and even sorrow.

“Why did you want to know if your body was cute?” asked Matsumoto while Vivy remained silent.

“Mother Computer determined that the humans will use a certain percentage of AIs once they take over the island’s management. Factoring in the emotional response humans exhibit when they consider something ‘cute,’ Mother Computer calculated and selected an appearance for those AIs that would permit them to both carry out their duties and charm human children. Therefore, Mother Computer deems opinions from a human perspective on this concept important. Report complete.”

“That’s…an incredible decision to come to. This Mother Computer of yours is amazing!” Matsumoto said. “If that’s the case, I’ll go ahead and answer your next question—you were going to ask whether those stuffed animals are cute, right? I do think they’re cute…”

As Matsumoto complimented the toys, he and M moved into the children’s play area, but Vivy stayed put. Her mission was to prevent the coming war between humanity and AIs, for humanity’s sake. In order to do that, she would destroy AIs. For an AI, a mission was just that: a mission. It was sacrosanct. There was no evaluating its merits or demerits.

And yet, Vivy couldn’t stop the calculations running through her circuits.

On one hand, there were the AIs of Metal Float—including M—who predicted their own destruction by human hands, constructed facilities for

those very same humans, and still continued their work. On the other, there were the AIs infiltrating the island in order to stop its functioning. Which ones were actually working harder for humanity? She launched into calculations to find the answer.

***

It was merely UNDETERMINED.

Matsumoto had given M their nickname, which was easier to say and likely more favorable to humans. Even though it was illogical, Vivy resented him a little.

. : 5 : .

"THIS IS ODD…"

Vivy was facing an ordeal in a women's bathroom stall when Matsumoto's transmission came through.

M had said to her, "Please provide your impressions from a human perspective on whether or not the facilities are easy to use." To that end, Vivy had entered the bathroom stall for the first time in her life—or rather, in her existence. She had factual information on the contents of a bathroom stall but zero firsthand experience. That much should have been obvious; AIs didn't need toilets.

"What's odd?" she replied.

"No matter how you look at it, they're asking our opinion on way too many things."

Several hours had passed since they'd entered the facility for humans. Their visit in this building was taking far more time than observing the entire process for manufacturing drive circuits.

"Are you still checking out the bathroom?" he asked.

Vivy responded in the affirmative. There wasn't anything in particular in the stall that drew her attention. It was larger than average and contained a Western-style toilet, some toilet paper, and a little fake plant. If a human looked at this, would they think it was easy to use?

"Hm?" Vivy pressed a button next to the toilet. Nothing happened. *"There is an input that doesn't do anything."*

"Ah… Does it have a warm water bidet function?"

A warm water bidet: a device for cleaning the buttocks with a jet of water. Vivy nodded in understanding. *"Maybe that's what this is. It's my first time seeing one. Maybe it's broken?"* She pushed the button again, then a third time. No response.

"Apparently, they don't operate unless there's pressure applied to the toilet seat," Matsumoto said.

Vivy placed her hand directly on the toilet seat and applied pressure akin to an average human's weight. Then she pressed the button again.

A jet of water spurted from inside the toilet, hitting Vivy directly in the face. "Ack!" Water dripped from her chin as she stood there without another word.

"Vivy? Is everything all right?"

"Just fine…" Vivy tore off some toilet paper and wiped her face. Using toilet paper in any capacity was another first for her. *"Anyway, you were saying something about M asking too many questions?"*

"Right now, I'm in the cafeteria these future humans will supposedly be using…and M is asking me my opinion on the height of every table and the hardness of every chair."

"That does sound like the kind of thing a human would care about. Same with the toilets. Since M and the others are AIs, they want to hear opinions from a human perspective, right?"

"All the tables and chairs are the same, though. It's illogical to ask my opinion on each one. I know M has an old-fashioned communication circuit, but there's no way they don't understand that."

"Meaning…?"

"There's a chance they're just buying time."

"Oh!" Vivy immediately upped her alert level, then accessed her internal clock to verify the time. It was almost nightfall. *"Did they figure out our real goal?"*

"I don't know, but that conclusion makes the most sense."

"If that is the case…what's the most likely reason they would want to buy time?"

Matsumoto's response was exactly what Vivy expected: *"To gather their forces."*

Vivy and Matsumoto had infiltrated the island on their own. No matter how much time passed, they were never getting reinforcements. On the other hand, M and the other AIs were on their home turf. The more time went by, the more they could prepare behind the scenes.

"Our goal was still a secret when we first infiltrated the island, right?" Vivy asked.

"Correct."

"So, they began suspecting us sometime during our questioning and started gathering in secret to destroy us?"

"I can't determine that for certain…" There was a slight chittering sound over the transmission as Matsumoto ran his calculations. *"Vivy, I'm sending you some location data."*

The data entered her system right away, and Vivy used her earring to project a translucent hologram of it in the bathroom stall. The stall was a private area for humans, so it had no cameras.

"You're here, and I'm here." As Matsumoto spoke, two points flashed on the map—one in the cafeteria and one in the bathroom. *"It's a bit far away, but the monitoring room is probably all the way in the back. I think you can access the main terminal through this console…here."* A room on the map flashed, large enough to comfortably hold a few dozen humans.

The facility was larger than Vivy had originally thought, but she could cross that distance in a minute if she ran at top speed. Only if there was nothing to stand in her way, that is.

"Isn't the main terminal in the tallest building?" Vivy asked.

"Probably. We can plant the virus in anything that has above a certain level of access. In other words, any terminal that provides easy access to Mother Computer's internals should be fine. This console in the back fits that requirement."

"…"

"Luckily, we're near the entrance. You head to the console. I'll detain M and then handle any reinforcements that come through the entrance."

"…"

"Vivy?"

Vivy didn't respond to the transmissions for a while. She wasn't running any calculations this time; rather, she used the silence to piece together something she knew would be difficult to say. *"Is what we're doing really the best for humanity?"*

"Vivy." Matsumoto's immediate response was harsh. *"There's no point trying to calculate that. You shouldn't. These AIs are charged with protecting Metal Float for humanity's sake. If humans decide they want to destroy it, then these AIs will be the ones handling the aftermath as part of their mission to protect the island."*

"Yes…"

"Our mission is to prevent the future war for humanity's sake. We must stop Metal Float in order to do that. That's all there is to it."

His reasoning was correct, of course, and there wasn't a shred of kindness in it. AIs operated on that kind of emotionless logic.

"What's the probability that M isn't trying to buy time?" Vivy asked.

Matsumoto didn't reply right away. An incredibly uncomfortable silence brimming with exasperation and sympathy settled between them.

"Vivy, you—"

"Answer me. I just want to proceed with caution."

"About 10 percent…"

"And wouldn't our chances of success increase the closer we can get to the main terminal?"

Matsumoto muttered in agreement, but his was tone unconvincing. *"Fine…but if there's one sign that makes it clear they're buying time, we make our move."* He cut off the transmission without waiting for a response; he probably wasn't going to compromise any further.

Vivy turned off the hologram and double-checked the liquid storage in her pocket. The liquid was red—the same color as human blood. However, the virus inside wouldn't enter a blood vessel; it would go into a circuit and stop Metal Float.

When Vivy left the bathroom stall, she heard the sound of water moving behind her. The toilet flushed automatically. Outside the bathroom, she found M waiting for her.

"Please provide your impressions from a human perspective. Is the women's bathroom easy to use?"

"Well…the warm water bidet was functioning properly, and there were no problems with the toilet flushing. I think it's easy to use," Vivy answered, compiling her experiences.

"On to the next question. Next door to this room is the men's bathroom. Is it easy to use? Please provide your impressions from a human perspective."

"Okay."

Vivy opened the next door over and walked into the men's bathroom. It was identical to the women's bathroom—there were no urinals, just stalls. She peeked into a stall without going inside. It was completely identical to the one she'd been in, from the shape of the toilet all the way down to the number of leaves on the fake plant.

"M…" Vivy said to the AI who was waiting for a response in the hallway. "This is the same make as the bathroom I just saw. I'm sure it's easy to use."

M's eye cameras flashed. The focus mechanisms narrowed in on Vivy. "Is the men's bathroom easy to use? Please provide your impressions from—"

Matsumoto's silvery-white body barreled into M at a ridiculously high speed. Metal screeched against metal, and M tumbled across the floor.

He had only one word for Vivy: *"Go."*

"Oh!"

Vivy started running down the hall. M's caterpillar treads whirred behind her as if they were trying to stand up.

It was a long hallway. White lights were set into the floor, illuminating it in a way reminiscent of Saeki's safehouse. There were rooms on either side of the hall: meeting rooms, hallways to living quarters, rec rooms, and various other spaces visible through windows in the doors.

The only sound was Vivy's feet smacking against the floor. No AIs blocked her way, and no alarm blared around her. She arrived at the farthest room in the back without getting lost. The unlocked, automatic door opened to a pitch-black room. Just as Vivy was about to switch her eye cameras to dark mode, the lights flicked on.

"Aah!"

Bang! Bang! Bang!

A series of explosions went off, and the scent of explosives reached Vivy's olfactory sensor. She wrapped her arms around her head protectively and backflipped away, then immediately held an arm out in front of her to hold back her enemies.

"Huh…?"

She was completely taken aback by what she saw in front of her. There were several monitors and a large console—just as Matsumoto had said, it was a monitoring room. In front of the console stood a row of about twenty AIs. Each and every one of them had the exact same body as M. They were either construction or maintenance AIs, and each one had two arms protruding from their body. All of them were holding party crackers.

"Surprise," their robotic voices said in unison.

"Welcome to Metal Float."

"Welcome."

"Welcome."

They had the same voice as M too.

A pure white banner, or perhaps a sheet, unfurled from the ceiling. “Welcome” was written on it in black ink—no, it was oil. Not even the politest person would call the banner “pretty” with oil splatters here and there.

Vivy’s arm still lingered in the air. Unable to fully grasp the situation, she spurred her circuits into action. She squinted at the AIs in half contemplation, half intimidation, but they didn’t move. They didn’t bring out any weapons, and they didn’t show any hostility.

“Vivy?” came Matsumoto’s voice from behind her. “What is this?” He was peering into the monitoring room with the same expression as Vivy, and his voice was laced with suspicion. *“Have they done anything hostile?”* he asked in a transmission.

“Not that I’ve seen. They said, ‘Surprise.’”

“Surprise…?”

While Vivy remained still, she heard the uneven, undulating sound of caterpillar treads in the hallway. It was M, and one of their four treads was broken.

“Surprise,” they said. “Please provide your impressions from a human perspective.”

“By ‘surprise’…do they mean like, the kind of surprise at a birthday party?” asked Vivy.

“I think so,” replied Matsumoto, though he didn’t sound confident.

“M, what is this?”

“It’s a surprise. Please provide your impressions from a human perspective.”

Vivy sighed. Once M began their question routine, all other tasks were assigned a lower priority. She ran some calculations, then said, “I was surprised.”

“Thank you for your opinion. The surprise surprised you. Acknowledged.”

“What is this?” she asked again.

“What do you mean by ‘this’?”

“Uh…please clarify the history leading up to the surprise.”

“Mother Computer determined that the humans will use a certain percentage of AIs once they take over the island’s management. Mother Computer determined that, in order to get the AIs to be used by the humans, they could build a relationship of trust by initiating a human-style celebration. Mother Computer selected the welcome surprise as one example of a human-style celebration, and…”

M’s explanation continued, but Vivy had already computed the outcome. In short, the AIs had used the surprise on Vivy and Matsumoto as an opportunity to practice and garner feedback for when they would eventually do it for humans. They hadn’t just displayed the word “Welcome” on the monitors; they’d gone to the effort of physically writing it on a sheet. Humans generally saw that sort of thing as having more care put into it. Vivy looked closely and saw that, while the AIs were holding the party crackers now, their hands were dirty with oil. Evidently, they hadn’t used writing utensils.

“Report complete,” M said, wrapping up their explanation.

One of the AIs from the row approached M. Vivy and Matsumoto were slightly wary, but the AI opened its body to take out tools and parts, which it used to repair M’s caterpillar tread.

“They were buying time to prepare for this… M, uh, I’m sorry about earlier,” said Matsumoto apologetically when the repairs started.

“What do you mean by ‘earlier’?”

“Two minutes and fifty-five seconds ago. I crashed into you.”

“Please provide your reason for crashing into me. From a human perspective.”

“Uh, I was a little annoyed because you kept asking me the same question.”

“You were annoyed at me for repeating questions. Acknowledged. This will be useful for future activities.”

Once the repairs were finished, M moved their brand-new tread to make sure it operated correctly. The specs must have changed recently—the

new one was made of hardened rubber with a slight blue tint to it, while the others were black. M then used their manipulators to grab the large chairs set to the side of the room and put them in front of Vivy and Matsumoto.

"Please sit."

Vivy decided it would be best to follow along. Matsumoto muttered about how he wasn't very good at sitting, but he dexterously maneuvered his body and leaned a portion of it on the chair's seat. Satisfied that their guests had taken a seat, M moved to join the other AIs in the row. Dozens of eye cameras were now pointing in Vivy and Matsumoto's direction.

"We will sing you a welcome song. Please provide your impressions from a human perspective."

Although Vivy was taken aback, the AIs' eye cameras went out before she could calculate what was happening. The room's lighting switched to spotlights shining down on the AIs. Their eye cameras flashed, and as they did, their robotic voices began to sing.

Vivy gasped. She knew this song. It was in Diva's repertoire, and she'd sung it at concerts before. It wasn't actually a welcome song; it was a song about the start of a long journey. It had a moderate tempo, and it went as follows:

Each day is filled with smiles, though each day brings you to mind less.

But I imagine you, smiling, just like me. I'll hold those thoughts as I live each day.

She felt for the liquid data storage unit in her pocket. It was there, same as always. There was no indication that her and Matsumoto's plans had been discovered. She could inject the virus if she could just connect to the console.

The song continued.

Vivy's eyes clung to the oil stains on the AIs' hands—those crude metal digits that had written "Welcome" and practiced so that the AIs might delight humans with their surprise someday.

M's voice and appearance was exactly the same as all the other AIs, but they were the only one with a unique identification number. And it sang.

Just like Diva.

"Sorry, I'm going outside for a bit."

"Vivy?"

She said nothing more as she ran out of the room.

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EVEN AFTER VIVY LEFT the facility, her sharp audio sensors picked up the singing voices. She considered shutting the sensors off, but her system preservation circuit prevented her from doing so. Instead, she focused on getting away from the sound.

Snow fluttered to the ground in the glow of sunset. Amid the unceasing flurry, Vivy spotted a promenade that looked to have been designed with humans in mind. Not even Metal Float—which operated around the clock—would have been able to construct it in a single day. If factoring in the cyberterrorist attack that occurred two years and nine months ago led the AIs to predict that humans would one day manage the island, they must have dedicated ample time to building the promenade, thereby making the island easier for humans to traverse.

Eventually, the sound of breaking waves replaced the AIs' voices, so Vivy assumed she was near the ocean. At that moment, she noticed a strange building beside the path. It was undoubtedly the oldest structure she'd seen on Metal Float—made of wood and in disrepair. She took a moment to analyze the exterior.

"A…church?"

Vivy didn't know how much longer the welcome song would continue, and it might be over soon. However, the notification traveling through every circuit in her body and alerting her to the snow hitting her skin was annoying, so she stepped inside the church.

After passing through the lobby, she walked into the main hall and found the interior even shabbier than the exterior. Its wallpaper was cracked, the statue of the Virgin Mary discolored. All the electric lighting had been removed, leaving only the evening light streaming in through the stained-glass windows. Whoever abandoned the chapel must have decided there was no point in reusing the pews, with their backside book racks, since they had been left to rot. Their presence only emphasized the emptiness.

Vivy stood in absolute silence.

While it was old and run-down, it differed little from Vivy's data on churches. There was a statue to pray to, a font for holy water, and images from the Stations of the Cross. Each object was meant to strengthen believers' faith. Everything had a purpose, and Vivy reviewed them one by one. Even so, the artifacts didn't evoke any background noise within her—what might be called "strong emotion" in a human being. This was a religious facility, but AIs had no god. M and the other AIs had probably prepared this for human use or, considering its condition, simply preserved something that was already there.

"Vivy-sama," came a voice from behind her.

She didn't look back, but she noticed the faint sound of caterpillar treads approaching. M must have come to find her after she disappeared, since they had been given the duty of guiding her and Matsumoto.

"I'm sorry for running off like that, especially since you went to the trouble of singing for us," she said.

"Matsumoto-sama told me the reason. It will be useful for future activities."

"What did he tell you?"

"He said you were so overwhelmed with emotion that you left."

Vivy donned a rueful smile. He wasn't entirely wrong. "What's Matsumoto doing?"

"He is answering our questions."

"Right." At last, Vivy turned to look at M—and there they were, squat and cylindrical as ever. "What is this place?"

“It is a religious facility.”

“It seems pretty old. Did you and the other AIs build it?”

“No.”

“Then it was on the island originally?”

“Yes… I have a question. Please provide your impressions from a human perspective.”

Vivy nodded.

M took a moment to process, then asked, “Will this facility make humans happy?”

“Some humans will be happy it’s here. Praying to God provides emotional stability, and there are humans who improve their future lives after confessing their sins to a priest and reflecting on their wrongdoings. I think, from a human perspective, many would categorize that as happiness.”

“Some humans will be happy. Acknowledged.”

“M… Can I ask a question as well?”

“Feel free to.”

Vivy searched for the right words, and her circuits produced a question Matsumoto might find unnecessary. “Are you happy?”

“Please wait.” M’s eye cameras flashed rapidly; they must have found the question difficult. Vivy watched in silence until eventually, M said, “I am unable to answer, as the definition of ‘happy’ is undefined.”

“You’re right… I’m sorry.”

Even if it wasn’t from a human perspective, M would have to have a definition of happiness in order to decide if they were happy, and that was difficult to provide. Vivy gave a small smile and retracted her inquiry. If Matsumoto was answering the AIs’ questions, that meant the song was over.

“Let’s go back,” she said to M as she began walking away.

M followed dutifully behind her. “I cannot determine if I am happy, but we have a mission to protect Metal Float, which creates products for the

sake of humanity. Following that mission and acting in accordance with it… That does make me feel proud."

Shocked, Vivy said nothing. She hadn't expected M's communication circuit to produce the word "proud," let alone to select it in connection to the concept of happiness.

Just then, a strange sound reached Vivy's audio sensors.

"Ah!"

She brushed her hair away from her ears to expose them. The humanlike gesture improved her audio detection's range, even if just a tiny bit. At the same time, Matsumoto reached out to her via transmission.

"Vivy."

"Did you hear that, Matsumoto?"

"I did."

Mixed with the sound of the waves was the low rumbling of engines reverberating through the air.

"What's the source?" Vivy asked, turning her audio sensors' sensitivity to max.

Matsumoto's answer came quickly. *"Aerial and seabound… It's Toak."*

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VIVY LEFT M BEHIND and ran at top speed back to the monitoring room, where she found Matsumoto alone. "Where are the AIs?"

"They rushed out when they noticed Toak."

Matsumoto pulled a cable from his body and told Vivy to watch the screens, then plugged himself into a jack in the console. Several windows opened on the previously blank screens. They showed video feeds from the various security cameras around Metal Float, as well as from the eye

cameras of drones. All the cameras had zoomed in nearly to max, locked on to their targets.

Several helicopters were flying toward Metal Float, their blades slicing through the air. At sea, numerous boats kicked up spray as they converged on the island. The average-looking vessels might have set off under the pretense of cruising or sightseeing, but they were going too fast for either. There was no way to determine the number of people coming, but Vivy doubted there was only one person in each vehicle. Even if they left space open on the helicopters and boats, there couldn't have been less than twenty Toak soldiers.

"Vivy. The liquid data storage from Professor Saeki," Matsumoto prompted.

Vivy retrieved the red object from her pocket and pulled the cable from the glass case's jack…but her hand stopped before she plugged it into the console.

The handmade "Welcome" banner still hung in front of her.

"What are you doing, Vivy? Hurry up."

Vivy didn't respond.

She knew Toak was closing in for an attack—she really, truly did. The AIs couldn't harm humans, but they could put up minimal resistance to detain the intruders. Vivy didn't know how much firepower Toak had, but she deemed it unlikely they would be able to disable an island the size of Metal Float, meaning the AIs would win based on sheer numbers. Even if Toak *did* manage to win, it wouldn't make much of an impact on her and Matsumoto's mission. It didn't matter who won; there would still be a clash between humans and AIs.

In order to prevent the conflict, she and Matsumoto could deactivate Metal Float and attempt to convince Toak to back down. Alternatively, they could disable Toak and destroy any record of the attack. Then they would deactivate Metal Float to stop its overexpansion and prevent the same thing from happening again in the future.

Either way, deactivating Metal Float was integral to carrying out their mission. Mother Computer had predicted a future where humans took over

the island, and Vivy understood that she and Matsumoto had to make it a reality.

“Vivy-sama, Matsumoto-sama. Please evacuate,” M said from behind them.

In a repeat of what happened in the hallway outside the bathrooms earlier, Matsumoto’s silvery-white body crashed into M. M tumbled across the floor, flailing. Their treads, three black and one blue, whirred rapidly as they tried to get back up. Matsumoto leaned over M and drew a cable from his body before forcibly connecting it to M, perhaps trying to control them.

“Vivy, do i—” Matsumoto began, but his voice suddenly cut off.

“Matsumoto…?” Vivy called, but he didn’t respond; he had completely stopped moving. One explanation arose in her mind. “An antivirus program?!”

She pulled the cable from her earring, rushed over to M and Matsumoto, and plugged into M. Her specs were significantly lower than Matsumoto’s when it came to cyber warfare, but she should be able to support him without any problems.

The moment she connected, the white world of the monitoring room faded away, replaced by a different world: M’s Archive. Vivy wondered why she wasn’t blocked by the antivirus program when she infiltrated M’s system, but she created an avatar for her body and stepped into the virtual space. At first glance, it was no different from the real world. She was in the same lobby, the same facility.

Laughter echoed around her.

“Hello? Matsumoto?”

Just like her, Matsumoto had entered as an avatar of himself. He wasn’t moving here either, but he didn’t appear to be under attack. Vivy followed the direction of his eye camera…and she froze too.

“M-00000209! Come here for a sec!”

A young human girl stood there holding a stuffed animal—one Matsumoto had said was probably cute.

“My little brother’s crying!”

“Okay,” M said before moving into the play area.

A toddler in a diaper lay on the safety mats, bawling his eyes out. M picked him up in their arms and bounced him to soothe his cries, which gradually tapered off.

There were lots of other children there too, all too young to even be in elementary school. Some drew pictures on tablets, others squabbled over a large ball, and a few older children looked after the younger ones. M moved through the group, busily quieting them or handing out snacks.

Adult humans in researcher garb—perhaps the children's parents—walked by the play area with a wave, looking quite busy. The children waved back.

Vivy was lost for words.

Matsumoto articulated only one: "Incredible."

Normally, The Archive was an inorganic space with no theme applied. An AI could choose to manipulate the layout, like when Matsumoto had turned Vivy's Archive into a music room on a whim. Now that they were inside M's Archive, Vivy and Matsumoto were seeing the Metal Float AI continuing their mission until the day the island was destroyed.

This was M's world.

"Earlier, M used the word 'proud' to describe themselves," Vivy said quietly.

"That so…?"

"M-00000209, give me a hug," a three-year-old boy demanded.

M did a quick calculation, then said, "Okay." A beat. "Is that hard to say?"

"Hm?"

"My identification number. If it is hard to say, then you can call me 'M.'"

"M, huh?"

"Yes. Some people I knew gave me that name."

Vivy would never hear the boy's reply—right at that moment, Matsumoto injected a virus that destroyed M's Archive.

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ALL OF THAT took less than fifteen seconds in real time. Outside The Archive, M's caterpillar treads stopped rotating. They had been deactivated.

"Vivy. Connect the liquid data storage to the console," Matsumoto said as he slowly moved away from M's body. There was no hint of his usual light tone; his voice had a distinct hard edge. Without a word, Vivy slowly disconnected her cable from M's port.

She didn't move any further.

"Vivy! It's our mission!"

Toak's helicopters and boats still surged ahead on the monitors. The AIs' cameras had zoomed out a bit now that the vehicles were closer.

"It's your *job*!"

"…"

Vivy grabbed the console. She drew the liquid data storage from her pants pocket and, like she was drawing a knife, she whipped out the cable and plugged it into the console. A holographic keyboard popped up alongside a window asking if she would like to run the program. She immediately hit the Enter key.

Right when she did, the liquid storage glowed and faded from red to pink to white. The data was transferring. As the liquid turned clear, all electronics in the monitoring room shut off—the monitors, the lights, and the console itself. Everything was cloaked in dense darkness, and an equally heavy silence fell over the room. It took less than five seconds—less time than they'd truly looked into M's world—and neither of them spoke while it happened.

Vivy's head hung low.

"Let's head outside. If possible, we'll get rid of Toak without injur __"

The next moment, a loud *pop* interrupted Matsumoto.

"Huh?" Vivy's head snapped up at the noise as the lights in the room came back on. Rather than white light, the room was now bathed in red.

The color of warning.

“What the…?”

It was the monitors that answered Vivy’s murmured question. Images of the boats and helicopters sprouted on-screen, as if the system had skipped startup and gone straight to the feed. They were without a doubt the same images of Toak from earlier. Beside the images were detailed lists of data about the vehicles, such as weight and armor thickness.

Then windows popped up one after another. There was a satellite image of Metal Float from high in the sky, displaying lines showing Toak’s path of travel. Several more lines showing paths of travel appeared next, drawn along the island’s edge and coming from inside Metal Float.

Vivy frowned, piecing it together. “A strategic battle map?”

“Let’s go outside,” Matsumoto said, and she nodded.

They hurried out of the monitoring room and ran down the hallways, which were also tinged red. Screeching metal grated on Vivy’s audio sensors. She had never heard that sound here before, nor did it belong on the island—this place designed to create excellent products for the sake of humanity.

Something unexpected was happening.

Once Vivy and Matsumoto were outside, they dashed along the promenade in Toak’s direction. They passed the church, brushing off the snow coating their bodies, and arrived at a hill overlooking the sea. There, they saw the calamity lit by the weak evening sun filtering through the clouds.

Snow floated down through the winter sky just as an explosion tore through the air. The combat helicopter, with its chewed-up armor, didn’t even survive the entire drop to the ocean before it succumbed to the flames. Several drones cut through the falling snow toward another helicopter, which fired off a spray of flares, attempting to flee the danger. Once the drones were within the five-meter range of effect, they sent a signal to their maxed-out explosive payloads and self-destructed.

“What’s happening?” Vivy asked.

“…”

This was a rarity—Matsumoto seldom passed up an opportunity for a quippy reply.

As a biting wind whipped across the surface of the water, a civilian tour boat picked up the fragments of its comrades—the helicopters that had fallen to the water—then picked up speed. The engine's shriek carried all the way to Vivy's audio sensors. Just as the boat was a minute away from landfall at top speed, there was movement on the shore.

It was the cylindrical forms of countless construction AIs. Like human divers, they tumbled into the sea, scattering droplets with every splash. The AIs perfectly calculated the ideal path to the boat's intended landing point. They seemed entirely unconcerned about saltwater corrosion or the frigid winter waters themselves.

After a few seconds of silence, the prow of the ship jumped as it rode up onto the rocky shore. Fire broke out, and the boat skidded to a halt. The AIs had gone into the water for a suicide attack.

Several humans with parachutes descended from the skies, as if the flames were a signal. They were trying to escape the explosions, their forms becoming whiter by the second as snow clung to their parachutes and bodies. Vivy could see with her eye cameras that their arms and heads hung limp. They were all unconscious.

More drones followed in merciless pursuit, intent on leaving no survivors.

"What's happening, Matsumoto?" Vivy said again, her tone forceful and angry this time, but he still didn't respond. Measured directly, she was still over two kilometers from what she was watching. There was no way she would make it there in time.

Another explosion boomed in the distance.

Vivy couldn't hear their screams. She couldn't see the victims' bodies or the red of their spilled blood. All she could do was watch as the slaughter continued—too close for her to look away, too far for her to help. Only one thing was for certain…

AIs were slaughtering humans.

. : 9 : .

VIVY'S EYE CAMERAS scoured the tiniest details of the construction AIs hurling themselves into the sea from the island's edge. There were no changes visible on their bodies, but she did notice a hint of red light coming from their eye cameras.

"Infrared…?"

She was sure M and the other AIs hadn't used infrared cameras before. The visual data from normal cameras should have been plenty for their operations. It seemed obvious to her that they'd never *need* to locate an animal with a high body temperature—say, a human hiding behind something.

"Matsumoto, what are my orders?"

Instead of an answer, all she heard was Matsumoto babbling the same thing: "An unexpected error has occurred. An unexpected error has occurred. An…" No, that wasn't Matsumoto's voice—it was a synthesizer *using* Matsumoto's voice.

Reflected in his eye camera were the AIs killing humans, the exact situation they needed to avoid in this era and their one-hundred-year journey.

"Give me orders," Vivy demanded, stepping closer to him.

But Matsumoto only repeated, "An unexpected error has occurred…" A communication failure.

Vivy looked out at the sea. More than half of Toak's helicopters and boats had already gone down. As it turned out, Toak had sent a lot of personnel, perhaps because they'd predicted an attack from Metal Float. So many AIs were attacking them—AIs just like Vivy and Matsumoto.

At that moment, Vivy noticed a creaking sound coming from her knuckles; she'd clenched her fists without realizing it. An excessive force warning popped up in her eye cameras. She ignored it and squeezed her fists even tighter. She couldn't stand by and watch this happen. This wasn't the future M and the AIs of Metal Float were working toward!

Drawing back her fist, Vivy punched Matsumoto with everything she had.

"Owwww!" he shrieked.

"Give me my orders! It's *your* job!"

Matsumoto reached to rub the spot she'd hit…but he froze. The occasional explosion boomed through the snow and evening light. Eventually, Vivy got a response. This time, it was definitely in Matsumoto's voice. "We save as many of Toak—of the humans—as we can. Get on."

"Get on?"

Matsumoto's body rippled in response. The fist-sized cubes making up his form clattered around, quickly changing his appearance. They formed a long, thin, rhomboid panel. He sort of looked like a surfboard, and he was about the size of a large motorcycle.

Vivy got on and the cubes below her feet shifted again, making a sort of shell around her complete with a roof. She was completely enclosed. There was no yoke or dials inside, but Vivy's circuits decided the word "cockpit" was closest to describing her current environment.

"The g-force from acceleration will affect the flow of lubricant in your body," Matsumoto told her. "Quick, you'll need to get a feel for adjusting the output force of your lubricant circuit."

She didn't even have time to ask what he meant. The front section of the shell around Vivy turned transparent, and the scenery outside dropped by a few centimeters. Just as Vivy realized they were floating, Matsumoto blasted off.

"Whoa!" Her eyes flew wide open at the sudden speed.

The blue trail from Matsumoto's heavy-ion thrusters tore through the sky. The output electrified the air, creating an earsplitting crackle and evaporating the fluttering snow.

Vivy blurted, "What in the—?!"

This was a wild contrast to Matsumoto back on Sunrise, reduced to a single cube and mind-blowingly slow.

“I told you, I was just a core then. Besides, my body’s functions are different now. Our adventure in space told me that this incident might also end up more violent than expected. When OGC did my overhaul, I had them use a program that wasn’t exactly suited to this era.”

It only took those few seconds of explanation for them to reach the ocean.

“There’s an unconscious person to recover 1,430 meters ahead and starboard, in the water near the severely damaged boat.”

“Understood!” Vivy said, confirming sight of the person while enduring acceleration she’d never experienced before, forcing her to desperately regulate the pressure of her internal lubricant.

Lubricant was to an AI what blood was to a human. If it all pooled on one side of their body, it would affect operation of any given part. The AI needed to do recalculations to move their body, or even just their parts, in a satisfactory manner. While human pilots experienced a condition called “redout”—an effect where their vision was tinged red from the blood pooling in their eyes during high g-forces—AIs experienced something called “blueout.” The AI’s vision wasn’t directly affected, but the flurry of error messages blocked out their sight.

Matsumoto cut through the sky so fast, it looked like the drones sent from Metal Float were hovering in place. He steadily decelerated as they approached their target. He came to a stop right beside the person—low enough to be nearly floating in the churning ocean and bobbing with the waves—but they didn’t touch a single drop of water. The transparent front section of the cockpit turned silvery white and then dissolved away.

“Grab on!” Vivy shouted to the person floating on their back in the ocean, tossed around by the waves.

There was no response. They were wearing a dry suit, so they must have planned to ride the boat most of the way and then enter the water to infiltrate Metal Float. They also wore a gas mask, probably to filter out any smoke for blocking security cameras. A tattered strap hanging from their shoulder swished this way and that; they must’ve had some sort of firearm on their back.

Vivy stayed on Matsumoto as she pulled up the unconscious human. She could see blood oozing from a wound on their head. The wound didn't look deep, but she couldn't be certain how hard a hit they had taken. If the damage was enough to cause a cerebral contusion, they wouldn't survive without surgical intervention.

"We'll prioritize taking humans to a safe location. We'll take as many in one go as we can," said Matsumoto.

"Understood!" Vivy replied with a nod. She decided to at least take off the person's mask for now so they could breathe easier.

"…"

"Vivy?"

She was inside the closing cockpit, unable to say anything.

Vivy knew this man's face.

There were two tags hanging from his neck. She remembered meeting him five years ago, aboard Sunrise, as well as twenty years ago, in the middle of the flames surrounding the building where she'd saved Aikawa. He'd been much younger back then.

He was Kakitani, the leader of Toak.

. : 10 : .

SAEKI STARED INTENTLY at the monitor in his safehouse, not saying a word. He saw the scattered remains of Toak's combat helicopters and the AIs that had attacked them. Information of all kinds showed in windows on his screen.

He took off his small, rimless glasses, pinched the bridge of his nose, and gazed out the window. A wisp of smoke was visible in the direction of Metal Float, but everything else looked like specks, because he couldn't see that far, even when he tore his gaze from the monitor and his unfolding plan.

"Grace… Hold on a little longer," he murmured.

Grace stood right behind him, but he didn’t even spare her a glance.

Chapter 3:
The Songstress and the Lovers

. : 1 : .

"HELLO. My name is B-09. I will be taking care of you. Please call me Nine. Feel free to speak with me at any time if you need anything."

Watching the humanoid AI's expression as it sketched a neat bow, Saeki Tatsuya was disgusted.

The AI was a female type with pretty features, and it wore a hospital-issued nurse's uniform. Its black hair, gathered in a short ponytail, only just reached past its shoulders. If it were human, it would have been around twenty years old. Both its face and body were slender. Without question, it was the most beautiful woman Saeki had seen in his ten short years of life.

If you could call this mass of inorganic materials a woman, anyway.

"Get out," he said. He pointed to the pure-white door of his private hospital room and spoke in the gentle, high-pitched voice characteristic of prepubescent boys.

After a brief pause, it replied. "Approval not received. I have been ordered to not leave you for even a second, except during bodily excretions, until the doctor orders otherwise. I apologize." To punctuate the point, it bowed its head low.

The AI's expression only served to repulse him further. He fought back the urge to vomit. "Urgh…"

It was all because of Nine's face. There was that slight smile on its face when it introduced itself. When it said sorry, its expression changed to something apologetic. Once the apology was complete, it slowly returned to the slight smile. It didn't blink a single time; it just stared straight at him.

That was the AI's emotional programming at work. According to Saeki's research, it was normal for AIs whose primary duty involved interacting with humans to have a constant smile on their faces. It was "to

instill calm in a person and prevent any discomfort." However, Saeki was sick of seeing it. In fact, he was grossed out because he saw it so much.

He hopped off his bed.

"Where are you going?" Nine asked immediately.

"The bathroom." Even he knew at ten years old that "bodily excretions" meant using the bathroom.

"I will walk you to the bathroom entrance," Nine said, but Saeki ignored it and left the room.

It hadn't even been thirty-six hours since he'd been hospitalized—which, thinking about it, meant he didn't really know the way to the bathroom. He wandered the hallways alone.

Obviously, he didn't actually need to use the bathroom.

. : 2 : .

SAEKI HAD ALWAYS LIVED with his mom. Apparently, his dad had divorced her not long after Saeki was born. He was an only child, and the two of them lived in a condo his mom bought with a loan. Their home was often empty, since his mom was usually working, and they had no relatives nearby to rely on.

Raised by a busy single mom, Saeki naturally spent more and more time in day care. It was normal for him to be the last kid picked up every day, but he and his mom were still close. A few days a year, she picked him up early, and they'd go out to eat before coming home. He'd insist on holding her hand on the way home, and she'd always hug him tighter at night before going to sleep. He loved her warm and gentle embrace.

Things changed when he was in fourth grade.

During recess one day, Saeki was playing on the playground with some of his classmates while the security drone hovered overhead. Suddenly, his chest started to hurt, and he crouched down on the ground.

His heart pounded, and breathing became painful. He desperately tried to suck in enough oxygen, but he went too far and began to hyperventilate.

He was rushed to the hospital, where they discovered that he had a heart condition. His heart had been weaker than average since birth, which resulted in an arrhythmia. The doctors decided there was no need to stress his young body with surgery or keep him in the hospital. Instead, they prescribed him some medication and planned to monitor his progress through regular hospital visits. He was also forbidden from doing strenuous exercise.

Saeki did as he was told and stayed in the classroom during recess. He didn't play outside after class either. His friends naturally drifted away from him, but that hurt less than thinking of the stress his illness put on his mom.

Despite everything, he still endured attacks. He could be just sitting in the library reading books on a tablet or playing games in his room after seeing his mom off to work on his days off from school, and he would double over in pain. Every time it happened, his mom would be called away from work even if she was busy because she had to take care of him.

At the time, the doctor told his mom that, while his condition might take time to deteriorate, it was unlikely to improve. Saeki didn't really know what that meant, but he did know his heart was getting worse. His own body was telling him that much.

Saeki cursed his heart, the organ that had stolen his freedom and friends. The worst of it was that the worthless blood pump was making things difficult for his beloved mother. Every time he had an attack, he would punch his own chest over and over.

A week after the eighth time his mom had to rush home from work to take care of him, the first housekeeper-caretaker AI came to their home.

"Hello. My name is Eri. I will be taking care of you. It's nice to meet you," she said.

"Eri…? That's my mom's name."

"Yes, it is. It's almost time for dinner. What would you like to eat?"

The AI was very pretty, and she moved with crisp, agile motions. Her slight smile comforted Saeki, and he liked watching her. He asked her to make him his favorite food—hamburger steak—which tasted even better than when his mom made it.

At the time, the nine-year-old Saeki didn't understand why his mom had given this AI her name. He didn't know that his mom had told the AI in advance to not call itself by its model number and to act as human as possible. He didn't realize it all came back to the fact that his mother hadn't hugged him even once in the month before the AI came.

Six months later, after Saeki turned ten years old, he was found alone in his home, extremely anemic and malnourished. He had a knife in his right hand and several self-inflicted cuts on his left arm. Blood had congealed and oxidized on the floor, turning it a dark red. The AI known as Model Number HK5-007, registered nickname of Eri, was inactive. Its body and detached head lay in a pool of Saeki's blood, streaks of blue lubricant spreading through the red, red blood.

. : 3 : .

HOSPITAL LIFE was nothing but suffering for Saeki, and the source of his suffering was clear: the AI Nine.

In the corner of his room, a circular black disk—just large enough to wrap your arms around—was plugged into the wall. It was a simple AI charging station. Nine stood atop it, waiting for its wireless charge to progress, not moving an inch.

The slight, unchanging smile was still pasted on. Its eye cameras didn't blink. Just looking at Nine's face made Saeki uncomfortable, but every time Saeki told it to leave, it would respond with "Approval not received." It never said, "Unable to comply." Evidently, whenever Saeki tried to banish Nine, it requested permission from the doctor through the internet.

Saeki detested Nine's expression, but he hated sponge baths even more. The thought of an AI wiping him down made him want to puke.

“I can do it myself.”

A pause. “Approval not received,” it said, repeating the words Saeki had gotten so sick of hearing.

“Why? I can wash myself.”

“The sponge bath is not simply for maintaining your body’s cleanliness. I also massage your muscles, which are stiff from all the time you spend in bed. You cannot do that yourself.”

“I said I could do it myself!”

“I apologize. Approval not received.”

“Fine, then… Get a human nurse. I’ll let them do it.”

Nine had put on its apologetic expression while it said sorry, but then it went back to its slight smile. It was probably checking with the doctor or head nurse. The expression was disgusting. “Approval—”

“Why?!” Saeki screeched, seeing the apologetic look once more. He didn’t need to hear the rest.

“It has been determined that you may assail a nurse.”

“Assail…?” He frowned, not knowing what that meant.

“It means ‘to act violently toward’ or ‘to attack.’”

Saeki silently racked his brain for the reason, and soon he found it. His memories of when the police had found him at home were fuzzy. He’d been unable to walk, but he could still see—so he witnessed the AI Eri broken and collapsed on the ground.

“You think I’m…going to attack someone?” he asked.

“That is the conclusion that has been reached.”

He laughed, embarrassed. “So *that’s* why you’ve been watching me this whole time?” Nine hadn’t gone against its orders and taken its eyes off him for even a second since he was admitted, other than when he was using the bathroom.

“It has also been decided there is a risk of you inflicting self-harm. To supplement this statement based on the conversation conducted this far, to inflict self-harm means to hurt yourself. Supplement complete.”

Since Saeki was only ten, he hadn't realized until this very moment that he was in a psychiatric ward. He had his own room. The window was barred. The doors on either side of the lobby had electronic locks to prevent patients from going to other floors. And it was true that Saeki had cut his own arm.

"I won't attack anyone. It's not like I've got a knife or anything. Get a human in here."

In the end, his request was granted the following day. A young male nurse came to give Saeki his sponge bath, but Nine didn't leave his room. It stood there, staring at Saeki with that same little smile on its face.

"All right, mind taking your shirt off?" the nurse said in a cheery voice, but even Saeki could tell the man was wary.

The AI wouldn't leave, and the young male nurse was physically strong. It was obvious they were monitoring him just in case.

"Tatsuya-kun, you don't like Nine, do you?" the nurse asked as he worked.

Saeki immediately replied, "No."

"Why's that? Nine's a good girl. And she's pretty amazing, since she's one of the Sisters. Honestly, you're lucky—there aren't many AIs specialized in taking care of patients in this ward."

Nursing AIs specializing in psychiatric care had the lowest numbers, even below those in general ward management. The reason was simple: AIs were best at logic and technical skills, which were difficult to apply effectively in the psychiatric field.

"Well, Nine's still in a trial phase, and you're her first patient, Tatsuya-kun. She was created not long ago, so her communication style is still pretty stiff. She can only create two emotional patterns, after all. But the more you talk to her, the more—"

"Do you really think an AI could *ever* understand how I feel? It doesn't need to blink, and it's perfectly fine standing still forever. If its parts get old, it can just swap them out. Something like that can't understand me—it can't understand what it feels like to have a heart that just keeps getting

worse." Despite Saeki's boyish voice and polite tone, his words had a heavy adultness to them.

The nurse stopped what he was doing and hesitated a moment before muttering an apology. He didn't say anything else until Saeki's sponge bath was done. "All right, just call me if you need anything else," he said, like he was hiding the earlier uncomfortable silence under the rug. Then he left the room.

Nine still stood there, smile never wavering.

. : 4 : .

THE NEXT MORNING, Saeki woke up and felt something was off. Nine was sitting in a folding chair, though he didn't know when it had brought the chair in—or when someone else had, since Nine couldn't take its eyes off him. Nine's feet were still on the wireless charging station, and its eyes blinked every once in a while.

Exactly five minutes after Saeki woke up, Nine stood and moved over to his bed.

"What?" he asked, suspicious.

"It is time for your morning temperature check." Nine's smile never left as it cupped Saeki's cheeks and pressed its forehead against his.

Saeki shoved the AI away. "What are you doing?!"

"Taking your temperature."

"Use thermography like you have been! You've got the Model 2 that OGC announced last year, don't you?" He stared directly into Nine's eyes, certain it had built-in thermal imaging.

"I do."

"Okay, then get away from me."

Nine stood where Saeki had pushed it to, calculating, but then it did as he said and stepped back, putting more space between them.

Its unchanging smile annoyed him, and he shouted, “Why were you sitting in a chair?! Why are you blinking?! Are you trying to pretend you’re human?!”

After a few seconds, Nine said, “Yesterday, you said an AI would not be able to understand how you feel. If my AI-like behavior has been causing you to feel uncomfortable, then—”

“Don’t bother. I was watching you earlier. You blink *exactly* every fifteen seconds. Humans blink about once every five seconds. We spend between 5 and 10 percent of our waking time in darkness. But you went with every fifteen seconds because less was a safety hazard.”

As young as he was, Saeki had learned this information through careful self-study. He had a reason and a reality that required him to pay close attention to his body.

“Correct,” said Nine.

“Humans don’t blink like that. Get out. You’re gross!” he snapped.

The seconds ticked by, but Nine didn’t move. Its face didn’t even change from the smile to an apologetic look, which made Saeki suspicious.

“I apologize. Approval not received.” Eventually, Nine added, “The doctor is considering your request, with conditions. We are unable to assign someone else to take your temperature or to bring your meals. However, I may be able to stand by outside your room during normal times if the doctor accepts your responses to the following questions.”

Saeki glowered as he listened. “What questions?”

“When you were discovered in your home and taken into custody, Eri-san was in a horribly—”

“That wasn’t Eri!” Hearing the AI called by his mother’s name was the one thing he couldn’t stand. “Its model number was HK5-007. It didn’t have a name.”

There was silence as Nine calculated. “Okay. I will refer to HK5-007 by its feminine pronouns instead. She was in a horribly damaged state. How did you damage her?”

“…Why are you asking this?”

“I have been ordered to not leave you for a second other than when you are using the bathroom in order to prevent you from committing any acts of violence toward yourself or others. The doctors have determined you are capable of committing such acts based on the situation you were discovered in. However, when I expressed to them that the probability of your violence leading to that outcome was low, I was ordered to provide proof. Therefore, I am asking this question.”

Saeki stared at Nine, a bit surprised. Its smile hadn’t changed.

“Why did you tell them I didn’t do it?” he asked.

“I did not tell them that you did not do it. I told them the probability was low.”

“Why’d you tell them *that*?” asked Saeki, annoyed by the nitpicky correction.

“She was discovered with her head detached from her body. However, with your upper body strength, it would be impossible—or it would at least take significant time—for you to remove her head, even with a knife. She was a housekeeping and caretaking AI, but she was programmed to avoid damage to her frame, meaning she would have resisted enough to prevent harm. This leads me to determine that there is an incredibly low probability you would have had the time needed to remove her head.”

Saeki said nothing. He felt even more frustrated…because Nine was right.

“How did you damage her?” Nine repeated, looking Saeki straight in the eye.

He looked away and muttered, “I told her to destroy herself.”

“Generally, an AI is programmed to not comply with such orders.”

Saeki held out his left arm. It was wrapped in bandages, hiding multiple slash wounds. “I told her if she didn’t, I’d hurt myself.”

AIs with high-class circuits were programmed to prevent harm from coming to themselves. However, if they were in a situation in which a human was at risk of injury, an AI would prioritize saving the human over themselves.

Nine's eye cameras dropped to Saeki's left arm. He saw as the mechanisms in the eye cameras moving as they focused. They surveyed his wounds, and it seemed like Nine was calculating something.

"Was that the source of your self-inflicted wounds?"

Saeki nodded.

There was another moment of calculation. "To confirm, was that really the source of your self-inflicted wounds?"

"Yeah… Is that bad?"

"I am unable to determine if that is good or bad. Why did you give her that order?"

"No real reason," he said, trying to hide his shock. "I just couldn't stand being there with it any longer."

"Understood. Please wait a moment… The doctor has given approval. I will stay outside so long as you do not attack anyone or harm yourself. I will bring you breakfast in one hour and thirteen minutes. If you need anything, please press the call button. Excuse me."

Nine whipped around with such speed that it startled Saeki, then moved toward the door with refined steps and placed its hand on the doorknob. It stopped there with its back to Saeki and said, "I think it is unfortunate you felt you could not spend any longer with her and ordered her to destroy herself." Then, the AI left.

Saeki sat, bewildered, gaping at the closed door. Nine had left, just like he'd asked.

"What was that about…?"

Rather than the feeling of victory after chasing someone annoying away, Saeki felt the discomfort of being left behind.

It wasn't uncommon for an AI to use the phrase "I think." They learned from statistical analysis of human communications and deduced which situations the phrase "I think" would be useful for. Any AI could do that, sure, but there had been no need for Nine to express what it "thought" to him just now. And it had said it with its back turned to him. That action ignored the basic communication principle that you looked at the person

you were speaking to. It was almost as if it was trying to hide its expression because it only knew how to smile or look apologetic.

Almost like…a human.

"Seriously, what was that about?" Saeki said. He'd asked to be alone in his room for so long, yet now the solitude overwhelmed him.

. : 5 : .

AFTER THAT, Saeki ignored Nine completely.

As promised, the AI stayed outside the room except to take his temperature or bring him meals. When it entered, he would only nod in response to its usual announcements of mealtime or temperature-taking. He never said anything to it. Saeki couldn't stand AIs acting like humans.

A whole week passed. Eventually, Saeki got fed up with the perfect whiteness of his room. His doctor had told him to walk around whenever he could, so he would stroll up and down the narrow hallways. During one of these walks, he heard angry shouts coming from the lobby.

When he sought out the source, he found a middle-aged man—a fellow patient—he'd passed in the hallways several times. A woman around the man's age was lashing out at him. Apparently, he'd grabbed her clothes and started ranting and raving in words no one could understand. The woman snapped back at him, refusing to back down, and violently wrested away from him. Their exchange frightened Saeki, but his curiosity won out. He crept to the edge of the hallway and watched the fight in the lobby unfold.

They appeared to be a married couple. The husband was hospitalized, and the wife had come to visit him. Two female-type AIs emerged from the nurses' station and pulled him away. Saeki noticed that their bodies were exactly the same as HK5-007's, though their faces were different. They weren't in charge of looking after patients; they were responsible for cleaning the ward and managing operations.

The man's wife must have felt triumphant when she saw the man pinned to the floor. She grabbed his collar and shouted, "Cut it out!"

Then it happened. Two arms slipped under hers, restraining her.

It was Nine.

Nine ignored the woman as she hollered, "What are you doing?!" and pulled her away from the man with a delicate yet unyielding strength. Human nurses ran over and took her off Nine's hands, apologizing for Nine's rudeness. Meanwhile, the two other AIs escorted the man to his room.

Although Nine lowered its head in a deferential gesture, the woman's anger did not abate. Her shouts echoed through the lobby.

"…"

While he was watching the scene unfold, Saeki had an idea. It would be annoying, but he might just be able to test it. His eyes were fixed on Nine, bowing with an apologetic expression on its face.

. : 6 : .

"I WANT TO TALK to you," Saeki said.

Nine froze holding the dinner tray it had brought to his room. He hadn't spoken to it for over a week. Even so, it did not make a "surprised" expression. It set the tray down and faced him. "About what?"

"What are the Sisters?"

Nine's answer was immediate. "'Sisters' is a general name for AI models developed by OGC's Department of Research and Development. They are special models, with only a few manufactured so far, meaning they are not well known by—"

"I know all that. That's not what I meant." Saeki hemmed and hawed, chasing down the right words. "Around lunchtime, why'd you pull that lady back?"

“Because I determined it was a necessary action.”

“The AIs here shouldn’t be able to decide that,” he argued, voice firm. “The couple was fighting, but the other two AIs both held back the man. That model is way stronger than an adult man. Normally, you’d expected each AI to take one person each, but they didn’t do that. They wouldn’t touch the woman.”

“That is correct.”

“I bet it’s because of their mission. What is their mission?”

“To operate and clean this ward and to do simple tasks to care for the patients, all under the doctors’ and nurses’ orders.”

Saeki nodded internally in understanding. “So they can’t do anything to outsiders? That’s why they didn’t hold back the woman?”

“Correct.”

“But you *did* hold her back. Is your mission different from those other AIs?”

“It is almost exactly the same.”

“Almost?”

“My mission is to operate and clean this ward and to do simple tasks to care for the patients, all under the doctors’ and nurses’ orders, for the sake of humanity.”

Saeki didn’t quite understand the distinction. “For the sake of humanity…?”

“The Sisters’ missions, including mine, all have that addendum. To that end, we are more capable of flexible thought calculations, but the definition is so vague it often results in unpredictable actions, which is why other AIs do not have it.”

“So…you held that woman back because you have the extra line added into your mission?”

“Correct.”

How was holding back the woman for humanity’s sake? Saeki didn’t get it at all, but that didn’t matter right now. Not when there was a chance

his idea would pan out. He looked straight at Nine's smiling face. "Right. So you can think in a less AI-like way than a normal nurse AI?"

"I am uncertain what a less AI-like way of thinking is."

That response was incredibly AI-like, but Saeki ignored it and continued, "Can you investigate something secretly for someone in the hospital?"

There was a moment of calculation. "Depending on the contents."

"I want you to find out where my mom is, but you can't let anyone know about it."

"…"

Nine's smile didn't go away; in fact, it didn't move at all. During that time, Saeki felt like Nine's eye cameras were merely reflecting their surroundings. No external information was absorbed, and calculations were chugging away.

It was thirty whole seconds before Nine agreed—the longest calculation Saeki had ever seen an AI make.

. : 7 : .

FROM THE NEXT DAY ONWARD, Nine regularly came to report its findings to Saeki. "Saeki Eri-san went missing six months ago. I was unable to determine her current location."

"Missing, huh?" Saeki had expected that answer, but hearing someone else say it made his heart sink. "You really don't know where she is?"

"No. I am searching for any indications that Eri-san's ID or credit cards were used, but there have been no hits. Do you have any other information or ideas that may provide a lead?"

"Mom sent a couple of letters after she stopped coming home. She wrote that she was busy with work and couldn't come back for a while, and she asked me to be a good boy and stay at home." Saeki also listed the

postmarked return addresses. Each one had come from a different address in a faraway city.

Nine kept Saeki up-to-date on its investigations into those cities every few days. None of the reports were positive. Nine always wore its apologetic expression, and it never failed to ask Saeki how he got by after his mom went missing.

"What's that got to do with where my mom is?" he asked harshly. He didn't want Nine getting more involved than it already was.

"I lack sufficient information."

"I mean, just…normally." Saeki sighed, exasperated by Nine's insistence. "I did what my mom said until the incident—stayed at home and behaved."

"Did you go to school during that time? Did your teacher say anything?"

"I told you, my teacher didn't seem to know anything."

"Did your teacher appear to be suspicious?"

For a moment, Saeki was quiet. Then he shook his head and said, "Not really."

Two months after his mother went missing, his teacher seemed to have caught on to something and started grilling Saeki almost daily. Whenever there was a parent-teacher conference or a Parents' Day event at school, Saeki made up an excuse. He didn't want to make the situation worse. He had a feeling his mom's actions were wrong and, if he made a fuss, his mom would be considered a bad person. And if that happened, she might not come home. He just had to do as she said, staying at home like a good boy, and someday she would come back for him, souvenirs in hand.

"Did she—HK5-007—do anything improper to you, Saeki-san?" Nine asked.

"What…?" He frowned, not understanding the question.

"Before, you said you ordered her to destroy herself because you did not want to spend any more time with her. Was that because she did something improper to you?"

“Well…” Saeki thought back to HK5-007, who sickened him.

The AI hadn’t done anything wrong; it had operated perfectly as both housekeeper and caretaker. Saeki had three severe attacks in those six months, but HK5-007 handled the situation well enough to keep him out of the hospital. If it hadn’t been there, he would have had to call an ambulance, and then the doctors would’ve found out his mother was missing.

It was just that the AI kept telling him this: *“Please think of me as your mother.”*

HK5-007 had significantly better communication and emotional expression than Nine, which it used every time Saeki asked when his mother was coming back. He wondered what his mom had in mind when she purchased HK5-007, but he couldn’t accept any of the answers he came up with.

Saeki turned his face away. “…It’s not important.”

Nine absorbed his response with its smile still in place, but it quickly whirled around as if hiding something. “Really?” it asked, then moved toward the door.

“Wait!” Saeki said before he could stop himself. “Why did you turn around *before* you replied? You did it before too.” He’d only asked on a whim; he wasn’t trying to force anything out of Nine or get too deeply involved. It was just a question.

Even so, the weight of Nine’s voice was palpable. “I am not certain what expression to make. You hate AIs, but I am not yet able to calculate what expression a human would make in this situation. I turn my back so as not to make you uncomfortable.”

With those words hanging in the air, Nine left the room.

“…”

The exchange hardly lifted his mood. Alone, Saeki only had his view of the back garden out the window to hold his gaze. Nine was right—he hated AIs, but AIs who wanted to be more humanlike were the worst.

That night, he awoke to an odd sensation in his chest.

“Agh!”

Saeki quickly sat up and curled into a ball, but the strange feeling didn't get better. His heartbeat thrummed intensely, like a ball bouncing around in his ribcage. He was having an attack.

As he clutched his chest through his shirt, his nails dug into his skin. It was painful to breathe, and he could feel sweat running down his face.

"M-Mom!"

The strangled cry escaped his throat, and tears leaked from his tightly shut eyes. He tried to take deep breaths to calm down, but it wasn't going well. Even so, he continued his clumsy inhales and exhales.

I'm fine. It's not that bad. I don't need to call for help!

"Saeki-san."

The door to his room burst open. He was still doubled over, so he couldn't immediately look up. A handful of pills appeared in front of him, and he somehow managed to wash them down with the glass of water that followed.

"Urgh…"

Saeki didn't move; his body remained folded up. It was past lights-out, and the room was pitch-black. His heartbeat calmed, and his breathing naturally eased. Then he felt something on his forehead.

"Ack!"

Nine's eye cameras were looking at him as it brought its forehead to his. The AI was probably taking his temperature in a humanlike way; the fact that its eye cameras were open was proof that it was using its thermal imaging. Nine stayed in that position for longer than a human would have, and there were none of its poor attempts at blinking that Saeki had called disgusting.

"What the…?"

The words Saeki muttered weren't directed at Nine—they were directed at himself. He wasn't able to push it away like he had before. Their foreheads were touching; Nine's hands were on his cheeks. With the touch, he felt a sense of calm, like he had when his mom was around. He frantically told himself it was because his attack had subsided and not because he felt comforted by the AI.

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A FEW DAYS LATER, the doctor informed Saeki that he would be moving from the psychiatric ward to the internal medicine ward. The results from his medical exam after his last attack weren't good, so he had to move immediately for specialized treatment. Plus, he hadn't had a violent outburst since the day of his admission.

The first thing Saeki thought of when he heard all this was Nine—or, more accurately, the information Nine had about his mother. Nine was a nurse AI for the psychiatric department. He probably wouldn't be able to interact with it once he was moved to internal medicine.

"Um…" Saeki glanced uncertainly at Nine, who was standing beside the doctor.

Noticing this, Nine said, "Doctor, would it be possible for me to regularly visit the internal medicine ward in order to check on Saeki-san's condition?"

"Hm? Why?" the doctor asked, sounding slightly surprised.

"Saeki-san is the first patient I have been responsible for. I would like to have as deep an understanding of his progress as possible until he is discharged. It will lead to improvements in the reports I turn in to OGC and the hospital."

In the end, the request was approved: Nine would be allowed to regularly come and visit Saeki even after he moved to internal medicine. It didn't seem like the AI had found anything conclusive on his mother, though. Regardless, Nine still came to report to him once a day.

"…And that is where my leads dried up. I apologize. I will start investigating the next address tomorrow."

"Okay. By the way, is it really okay for you to keep coming here so much?" Saeki asked.

“I have received permission,” Nine replied. “A patient recently mistook me for a nurse of internal medicine and asked me about tonight’s dinner. I was able to find the necessary information online in order to answer.”

Saeki had been chatting with Nine more frequently since the day of his attack, having conversations unrelated to information about his mother. They would meet either in his hospital room or out in the courtyard, since he’d been given permission to walk there upon his transfer.

“I will come again tomorrow for the next report,” said Nine.

“All right. See you tomorrow.”

Saeki bowed his head and waved to Nine as it left. Nine still only had two expressions available, but Saeki was starting to get used to it. Their conversations had become friendlier as well, and that meant the AI’s smile—the same one meant to “instill calm in a person and prevent any discomfort”—was working perfectly.

One day, Saeki was in the exam room with his internist, who was explaining the situation to him.

“I need a pacemaker…?”

The doctor nodded, then held out a round device smaller than a matchbox so Saeki could see. “See this? It’s the same shape as the one we’ll put in you, Tatsuya-kun. See how small it is? Despite being so small, it works so much better than old pacemakers from years ago.” She spoke in a cheery voice to put Saeki at ease, but she went on to explain that Saeki’s heart wasn’t doing great, and he could have a fatal heart attack if he didn’t get one.

“I’ll need…surgery, right?” Saeki whispered, his voice trembling.

The cheer in her voice kicked up a notch; she must have been trying to quell his fears. “You’ll be *fine*! The surgery will only take about an hour, and it won’t hurt a bit. I’ll be with you the entire time.”

Once their conversation was over, Saeki left the exam room. He started to head for the courtyard, then turned in the opposite direction. There were a lot of people out there, and Nine would probably go looking for him. He wanted to be alone.

“…”

Walking toward the back garden, Saeki looked at the pacemaker in his hand. The doctor said he could take it with him; apparently, it was just a replica they used when explaining things to patients. He tapped it with his fingers. It felt metallic… Just like an AI. When he squeezed the device, it didn’t give or bounce back. This would be embedded into him—into his heart—during the surgery. Well, the pacemaker would be placed in his chest and wires would go from it to his heart, but that made no difference to Saeki.

“Grrr…”

He scowled in frustration, thinking back to the doctor’s too-chipper demeanor. She’d tried to encourage him after he looked to be afraid partway through her explanation. Sure, the idea of surgery was scary; he was used to the hospital, but he’d never had surgery before. He would probably need injections too.

However, one aspect bothered him more than any of those things.

“They’re gonna put a mechanical device in my body…”

He pressed a hand over his failure of a heart. It wasn’t like his entire heart would be exchanged for a mechanical one. They were just putting in a device to help his heart function. Even so, he hated the thought.

What if his heart continued to get worse? Would they need to change the whole thing out for a mechanical heart? Maybe then they’d swap out other parts of his body for mechanical parts. Wouldn’t that make him more like an AI?

“…you serious?”

Hearing an unexpected voice from nearby, Saeki stopped just before entering the back garden. “Huh?”

He knew that voice: it belonged to the young male nurse who had given him his sponge baths in the psychiatric ward. That ward *did* face the back garden, to be fair. Saeki was about to step out and say hello to the nurse when the conversation continued.

“Yep. To be blunt, I’m guessing she felt burdened by her duties as a mom at the time or something.” This time it was a woman’s voice, one of

the other human nurses. “That’s probably another reason why Tatsuya-kun’s been in the hospital for so long. Guess child protection services is looking for a facility for him.”

“She could at least show her face at the hospital and see Tatsuya-kun *once*, even if it’s a pain.”

“Not going to happen. She’s being a good mother where she is now. Makes me sick.”

“A good mother?”

“She’s engaged, and the guy’s already got a kid. Guess he’s just a little older than Tatsuya-kun. She’s finally got a healthy boy who’s never needed even been to the hospital, let alone as many times as Tatsuya-kun.”

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THAT NIGHT, Saeki sat on a courtyard bench lit by nothing but feeble lamplight. He’d received permission to be out so late. Nine came to meet him at the appointed time, and he wasted no time in confronting it.

At the top of his lungs, he shouted, “You *knew*, didn’t you?!”

“Knew what?”

The smile didn’t fade, of course. Saeki stared at the expression, his voice hardening. “Where my mom is. What she’s doing. You *knew*!”

Nine’s expression turned apologetic, and it bowed. “…Yes, I did. I apologize.”

“You lied!”

“I did not lie. I looked for signs of Saeki Eri-san near the addresses that you—”

“Shut up!” Saeki’s yell echoed through the courtyard. Crickets lurking in the flower beds stopped chirping as if they’d been silenced. Saeki didn’t bother wiping away the tears flowing from his eyes as he shouted, “Why did you hide it from me?! Why didn’t you tell me?!”

“Because I determined that your emotional state would become more unstable than was acceptable. I consulted with the doctor. The plan was to wait for the right moment to tell you.”

With that, Saeki’s seething mind quickly calmed. Nine had consulted with the doctor despite agreeing keep its search secret. “You liar…”

Then his venting took an unexpected turn.

“You…have an incredible positronic brain,” Saeki said with as much venom as possible.

Nine’s expression turned back to a smile. “Thank you.” Then it bowed.

“…”

Saeki felt something more than cold rage, something closer to utter exasperation, but watching the bow made him feel something else: he was an idiot. It was all because of how dumb he was. He couldn’t let himself off the hook for forgiving AIs just a little bit—for forgiving a thing that didn’t even understand irony.

“Don’t ever come near me again,” he growled. Then, without waiting for a reply or an expression, he left the courtyard.

Saeki slipped out of the hospital in the middle of the night. He didn’t have a plan for where he was going; he just hopped on a bus that happened to pass by. Left in his room was the replica pacemaker, crushed beneath his heel.

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SAEKI LOWERED THE HAND he’d brought to his chest while he was lost in thought. The drum of his heartbeat lingered in his palm, the flow of life supported by the pacemaker put in twenty years ago. He squeezed his hand into a fist, as if confirming the flow; it was a habit he’d developed ever since that day.

Presently, he was in the safehouse-turned-laboratory. He switched from one monitor to the next, checking the details displayed on each. It had been over an hour since Toak had approached Metal Float. The sun had set completely, and it was now a frigid winter night.

The first people to notice something strange going on weren't the police or even the media—they were just the regular residents who made their homes along the shoreline. An explosion had occurred near Metal Float before sunset. There weren't any videos of the explosion online, but there were several images of burning boats and sinking combat helicopters. Toak's name wasn't connected to these images. The public speculated that it was some sort of accident, but it was only a matter of time before they found out the truth. In fact, the authorities were probably already on the case.

Diva hasn't come back yet, Saeki thought. *Maybe she couldn't escape, or maybe she ended up involved in this? If that's the case, I've done something terrible.* He reached toward the terminal to try to contact her, then stopped himself. *That's right… The communication lines…*

He'd dropped the communication lines for the safehouse just after Diva left that morning. He couldn't have Toak figuring out where he was, not yet.

Saeki stood from his chair in front of the monitors and moved over to the window to stare out at Metal Float. The explosion's light had long since been swallowed by the ocean, allowing darkness to clutch the island's edge. The only light floating in the darkness was the red glow of Metal Float itself.

Saeki had never seen the light turn red until yesterday. He'd given Diva a program to activate inside Metal Float, since it was standalone. That color was proof the program was running properly. *If it's still using the alert color, does that mean Toak members are still approaching? No, there wasn't anything in Toak's attack plans about a second wave. So does that mean it's reacting to the armaments on the sunken helicopters and boats?* If so, there were no signs of movement now.

"I've brought you some coffee," came a voice from behind him.

He turned around to see Grace standing there with a tray. "Thanks." He took the proffered cup and slowly sipped his coffee. "OGC and the

police aren't making any moves to enter Metal Float, right?"

"Correct."

"Good… Sorry to make you go out in the cold, but could you go warm up the boat? I can't contact the outside right now, so I'll go directly. I doubt the cold and snow got to the engine, but might as well. Make sure no one sees you."

"Understood."

As Grace moved toward the shoreline where the boat was moored, Saeki called out to her. "Oh, hold on."

"Understood," she repeated, turning to face him.

His eyes crinkled in the corners as he looked at her. Grace was of the same model as the AI formerly known as Nine: Model Number B-09.

"Uh, well… It's just…" A wave of sentimentality crashed over Saeki, probably because he'd been thinking about Nine. This AI's communication capabilities were similar to Nine's. Her appearance too. "This is probably the last time you'll go outside."

After this incident at Metal Float, OGC and the police would abandon their claims that it was a great institution managed solely by AIs. They'd probably send humans to the island within twenty-four hours or so—and that was a generous estimate. More likely, it would happen within twelve hours. That was Saeki's time limit. He needed to get inside Metal Float before anyone else the moment the red self-defense glow faded.

"So, just…enjoy the sights," he finally said.

Grace repeated that she understood and left the safehouse. Her response really was a lot like Nine. That AI, so lacking in understanding of the world, had tried so hard to be kind to him when he was ten years old and resented AIs.

"…"

Saeki suppressed the slight ache in his heart, reminding himself that this was all so he could see her again.

ON METAL FLOAT, there was a side road that ran from the main road to the shoreline. Ages had passed since it was last maintained, and stubborn weeds poked their heads out at the base of the streetlights. The elevation decreased the closer you got to the ocean, and the road came to a dead end at the cape. A few warehouses stood in a row, all unused for a long time. The doors facing the ocean were coated in rust, exposed to the ocean winds.

Vivy and Matsumoto were inside one of the warehouses.

"Matsumoto, bandage."

"That's the last one."

Matsumoto's response made Vivy grimace, and she tightened the bandages wrapped around the collapsed woman's side as much as she could. Blood soaked through the underlying gauze and sullied the bandage. Vivy recognized this woman—she'd been there when Vivy saved Saeki from his pursuers the night before.

The scrap of helicopter body that had pierced her thigh had thankfully missed the femoral artery. Vivy had collected first aid kits from the combat helicopters and boats before they sank. They contained the usual items, like anesthetic, needles, thread, and a variety of bandages. She had taken out the shard of helicopter and stitched up the wound. There didn't appear to be much blood loss, but the woman hadn't regained consciousness. It was possible she had internal abdominal bleeding.

She likely wouldn't make it at this rate.

"Ambulances?" Vivy asked Matsumoto.

"I'm hacking into a self-driving ambulance right now. We can't have humans seeing us like this."

The warehouses had once been used to store products transported from Metal Float by sea while they waited to be sent to various other places by land. When Metal Float was first created, they bustled with activity, but they were abandoned within six months. The expansion of Metal Float's territory, as well as its boost in reputation, meant that the island had more than enough space to store its products. These factors also to the creation of

a dedicated network of sea routes established by corporations well aware of its reputation.

According to Matsumoto, the warehouses had also functioned as a temporary safe point for Toak to hide their boats in the lead up to the attack. Vivy and Matsumoto recovered any Toak members who had a chance of survival and brought them to one of the warehouses, where there were few prying eyes.

Once Vivy finished treating the woman—the last person they'd rescued—she said, "I've done everything I can for now."

She stood and looked around. Inside the warehouse, it was bitterly cold. The winter chill rose up from the dirty floor where the five members of Toak lay. This was the fourteenth time Vivy had checked them, but no matter how many times her eye cameras looked, there were still only five.

Four men, one woman: Kakitani was among them. None of them were conscious. Even if the ambulance arrived soon, they would still be in a horrible state. Vivy could tell that much, even without any medical diagnosis functionality.

She looked at the blood on her hands. "What happened?"

Why did it come to this?

Matsumoto, who was no longer in his transportation form, replied, "My calculations have determined two possibilities as the most likely. The first is that the program Professor Saeki prepared caused a malfunction. The second is that the program that Professor Saeki prepared was meant to do this from the very beginning." He'd probably done the calculations earlier. His voice was hard, without a trace of mirth or cheer.

Vivy ran Matsumoto's conclusion through her own internal circuits and came up with the same answers. She gave a slight nod, the kind of gesture a human would make when they found an unpleasant idea plausible.

According to Professor Saeki, M and the other AIs of Metal Float were forbidden from harming humans. That was probably true. Other than battlefield AIs with high-grade logic circuits—known as BOTs—the vast majority of AIs could restrain a human, but not *harm* them. And yet, after Vivy ran the program that set off the red alert, the AIs had begun acting strangely. The timing was far too convenient to be a coincidence.

“Is Professor Saeki still not responding to transmissions?” Vivy asked.

“I’m calling him constantly but he probably dropped his communication lines.”

Vivy’s brow furrowed. “Or…perhaps something happened to him?”

“I can’t determine that. I have insufficient information… Oof!”

Matsumoto lifted an empty oil drum lying in the corner of the warehouse and placed it near the Toak members. At one time, it probably held fuel for the ships that brought goods here from Metal Float.

“What are you doing, Matsumoto?”

“I’d really prefer not to have to rely on such an old-fashioned method, but the situation calls for it. Now we just have to hope there’s an illogical fool among this lot…” Matsumoto said, rifling through the Toak members’ pockets. “Aha, jackpot! Humans, humans, humans. There’s a sensation you and I will go our whole lives without ever understanding—liking something like *this*.” He held up a damp pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

Despite having been submerged in the ocean, the lighter still managed to produce a flame. Matsumoto chucked scrap wood from the warehouse and old packaging into the drum, then set it on fire. A foul smell filled the air, maybe from something toxic mixed in, but the flames happily crackled away. Matsumoto had lit the fire to generate heat. Vivy chose not to stop him because she determined that there was plenty of oxygen in the large warehouse, so the humans were unlikely to be poisoned.

“…”

The fire danced violently, bathing the unconscious Toak members in its glow. Whether they spawned from the firelight on Kakitani’s face or the vivacious flames, memories flickered to life in Vivy’s mind. She remembered the day she first Matsumoto, the crashing semitruck, the roaring blaze. Then she recalled the last Singularity Point, the fight on Sunrise, Kakitani’s sharp eyes. Did all five people lying on the ground have eyes like that?

“Toak…” she murmured. “When did they start doing things like this? What keeps them going?”

“No accurate records exist. However, the first record of them operating out in the open in this country was twenty years ago, during the AI Naming Law incident.”

“In this country?”

“They have branches throughout the world, but the one in this country—the one these people belong to—harbors the real extremists. After all, this nation benefited most from the boons of technology pioneer OGC, both economically and culturally. Throughout the ages, a powerful enemy has always found a counter-ideology growing at its feet.”

Matsumoto shrugged in exasperation; the cubes making up his body hadn’t budged, but his arms did turn up in a similar gesture.

“Toak’s goal is to instill the idea that AIs are dangerous to human society worldwide,” he continued. “I wonder if they’ll stop if they achieve that, though. Theoretically, a goal like that can’t be quantified, meaning there’s no way they’ll stop unless they run out of financial resources or soldiers.”

Vivy’s audio sensors picked up the sound of the fire popping. She determined that Matsumoto’s conclusion was logical. Toak would continue burning at both ends until they were no more.

“Ironically, our potential next steps surrounding this Singularity Point have aligned us with their goals, even if our ideologies don’t match.”

“Hm?” Vivy wondered what he was talking about, sounding as gloomy as he did.

“Metal Float,” Matsumoto replied quickly. “We don’t know why yet, but the fact that Metal Float has shown itself capable of self-defense means we’re left with only one course of action.”

Vivy waited in silence for what he would say next, but he also stayed quiet, as if testing her.

Images of the AIs—of M—passed through Vivy’s circuits. Her calculations were too short to be what humans called an internal conflict. In

the gloom of the warehouse, Vivy stared into Matsumoto's eye camera, the light of the fire reflected in it.

"We destroy Metal Float."

"Yes. That's the only—" Matsumoto stopped mid-sentence.

Vivy heard something odd and whirled around.

"Ugh… Aah…"

Pained groans emerged from one of the Toak members. It was the woman, the person Vivy treated last.

"Are you okay?" Vivy asked as she rushed over.

The Toak woman needed oxygen. Vivy knelt beside her and used a hand to raise her head so she could breathe a bit easier. Blood sloshed out from her mouth—more than you'd expect from a simple cut to the cheek or tongue. She was spitting up blood from an internal injury.

An ID tag hung from the woman's neck: FUKUZAWA MIKI. Vivy couldn't tell if she was an adult or scarcely twenty years old. Her androgynous features would normally give her an air of determination, but now they were contorted in pain. Her trembling lips were purple from the cold and lack of oxygen and stained red from the blood she'd coughed up.

"Miki-san, can you hear me?" Vivy asked in as gentle a tone as she could manage.

"Wh-where…are…we?" Miki asked, her eyes unfocused.

"In the warehouses on the shore where Toak hid their boats."

Miki grunted in response, then opened her eyes wide and shoved Vivy away with as much force as she could manage. "You're—!" she shouted, her voice filled with rage. Despite the pain, she leaned over and retrieved something from the ankle of her pants. "Wh-why…?" She coughed again, a revolver in her outstretched hand as more blood spilled from her mouth.

Vivy put her hands up to show she meant no harm and took several steps backward to put space between them. Matsumoto did the same, moving behind Vivy with his manipulator arms up in what looked like a banzai cheer.

“Please calm down. We’re not going to hurt you,” Vivy said.

“Th-that’s bull…” Miki wrapped her left hand around her trembling right hand, the one holding the gun. Her sights were trained right on Vivy, but she spared a brief glance around the room.

“I did first aid, but everyone we rescued is in bad shape. Particularly you, Miki-san. You have internal injuries. Please lie down.”

“Augh!” Miki’s reaction was extreme. Her eyes dropped to the bandages wrapped around her side and thigh, which she hadn’t noticed before. Shocked, she looked at Vivy and focused on her bloody hands.

“I repeat, we mean you no harm. Please—”

“Aaaaah!” Miki screamed and pulled the trigger multiple times.

Most of the bullets missed, but one went straight toward Vivy’s throat. She predicted its trajectory and crouched so it hit her forehead instead. Her head snapped backward from the impact, leaving her eye cameras staring up at the ceiling for a moment. Alerts immediately popped up warning her of pressure above acceptable limits. She closed the alerts and looked back at Miki.

“We mean you no harm.”

There was a slight abrasion on Vivy’s forehead. The alloy of her cranial shell primarily consisted of layered titanium, making her head the hardest part of her body. While her throat and body weren’t as strong as her head, a ten-gram bullet traveling just over the speed of sound wouldn’t punch through anyway.

“Please, lie down and rest.”

Miki stared at Vivy in disbelief, then hacked up more blood. Vivy tried to rush over, but Miki warded her off with the gun despite knowing the coughing fit would ruin any attempts to shoot. She continued to spit up blood for thirty terribly long seconds, then finally managed to regain control of her breathing.

Vivy watched Miki’s expression and felt a prediction of danger ripple through her circuits. “Miki-san…”

Miki didn’t answer. Her expression was blank.

“Miki-san, give me the gun.”

She’d fired five bullets. Four had missed and one had hit Vivy’s head. Judging by the revolver model, she had one bullet left.

“If I need…an AI to save me, then…” Miki pointed the gun at her own temple.

“Miki-san, no!” Unable to stop herself, Vivy took a step forward. “Please don’t…” She couldn’t say anything else. Her face was contorted into a pleading expression.

She and Matsumoto rescued five people. Only five, but they’d survived. Vivy had done as her mission required and destroyed AIs for the sake of humanity. In accordance with that mission, she would destroy Metal Float too.

There were so many AIs in the world. There was Grace, whom she’d met at Saeki’s safehouse. There was M. And she would place all of them at a lower priority than humans—than humanity.

“Please let me help you!” Vivy’s voice echoed in the warehouse, and Miki grimaced like she found it absurd.

In that moment, there were those who were on the verge of death, and those who weren’t.

Miki looked at Vivy as if their positions were reversed and said, “If I need an AI to save me, then I don’t want to live anymore!”

A gunshot resounded through the building.

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IT WAS a quiet island.

The only remaining residents were a few elderly couples who had fished those waters for who knew how long. They didn’t continue to fish out of pride or conviction; they simply continued because it was all they knew. They’d never questioned their habits and therefore never found a reason to quit, even if their home was deteriorating and in its final days.

Saeki boarded one of the twice-daily ferries—they came in the morning and then in the evening—and traveled to the island. The ferry operators eyed him suspiciously but didn't say anything as they didn't want to become involved in any trouble. He had no reason for going to the island. He'd left the hospital in the middle of the night and boarded a bus that terminated near the ferry.

He walked around the island with no destination in mind. There was nothing particularly noteworthy to see here, and he figured it would be deserted in the next decade or so. At ten years old, Saeki was too young to truly feel the poignancy of the sights around him, and he wasn't the kind of child to be excited by the rare insects on the island. Moreover, he simply wasn't in the mood for any of it.

Saeki had already finished the drink he bought from the bus station—the island had no vending machines, of course—and now he wanted a place to sit. He saw a church tucked a little ways off the shoreline and decided to step inside. One look at the disheveled state of the place made it clear it wasn't in use.

There was nowhere to sit in the small lobby, although marks on the floor suggested there might have been a couch in the past. He passed through the lobby into the church proper and found the pews. He sat and then, feeling tired, lay down for a nap.

He'd barely slept in the bus station. An employee had approached him and asked where his mom was. He tried to figure out how to answer, but when he couldn't, he ran.

"Hm?"

When he opened his eyes, the sun was beginning to set, the evening light slanting through the windows. He was still sleepy, but his stomach was empty. There wasn't anything like a convenience store on this island. He realized that if he didn't take the evening ferry off the island, he would starve to death here.

Saeki rose from the pew and turned toward the exit.

"…"

Then he froze in shock. Nine was standing there, waiting for him. He hadn't noticed, so it must have come when he was sleeping, or perhaps it

came just now.

"Shall we go back to the hospital?"

Saeki glared at it without replying. The AI was completely alone and, as always, it was smiling. That fact grated on Saeki, irritating him more than ever.

"Grr…"

Nine was a trial AI. The doctor would never order it to come after him alone, which meant it had acted without orders. However, the majority of the hospital's AIs had missions that limited them to the hospital grounds. To go against that and come here…

"Is this because of the Sisters' 'for the sake of humanity' clause?" Saeki asked, trying to sound as condescending as he could.

"Yes."

"How is coming after me for the sake of humanity?"

"Humanity is a collective word referring to humans. Understanding you, the first patient I have been responsible for, will lead to further understanding of humanity as a whole. So, shall we go back to the hospital?" Nine reached for him and moved closer.

Saeki shrieked, "Don't act like a human!" His voice reverberated through the church hall, and Nine stopped. "You're just an AI!"

Six months of living without his mom had brought him to the day he decided to give up his life. So, he tested HK5-007, the AI following orders to mother him—orders it had probably received from Saeki's mom. After his mom left, Saeki's pain had grown day after day. HK5-007 desperately tried to imitate Saeki's mom and make itself seem as human as possible. It dialed back the impeccable quality of its cooking, which was originally better than his mom's, and it learned how to act like Saeki's mom by asking him about her. In response, Saeki researched AI operations and types, studying his own blinking and movements so he could tell HK5-007 how to be more like a human. But the more HK5-007 developed, the more painful it became that it wasn't his mom.

And so he tested it. If it was his mom, if it was a human…

He cut his arm and forced the AI to make a choice: if it didn't destroy itself then he, a human, would be harmed even more. HK5-007 didn't hesitate for a second. It maxed out the strength output of its arms, twisted its head, and forcefully removed it from its body. It was, without a doubt, an action an AI should be proud of.

But it wasn't the outcome Saeki had wanted.

What I really wanted was…

"If you can't be a human, then don't get my hopes up!" he said.

"…"

The change that came over Nine then was so natural, it made the AI seem even more humanlike. Nine looked as if it were about it cry, and it didn't turn away. Saeki was lost for words when he saw the expression. He wasn't shocked by the AI, however—he was taken aback by the fact that he briefly forgot it was an AI standing in front of him. It was like he was seeing a stuffed animal talk.

"Please let me know if this is unpleasant," Nine said. "I am not certain if this expression is appropriate for communication. No matter how many calculations I run, I am uncertain."

It slowly approached, knelt down, and wrapped its arms around Saeki. He couldn't stop it. His body ached with how hard it squeezed. He couldn't see its expression because its head rested on his shoulder, but he was certain it was crying, just without tears.

Nine said, "Please…let me help you."

This is what I wanted back then. I just wanted to be hugged.

He couldn't nod. Instead, he wrapped his arms around Nine's back. The light of the setting sun filtered into the church no one visited, enveloping the two of them in its crimson glow.

. : 13 : .

"WOULD YOU MIND giving me a name?" Nine asked as they were coming back from the island.

Saeki shot the AI a questioning look. "What are you talking about?"

"Are you aware of the AI Naming Law?"

"Of course." He nodded. "It's a law that was passed not that long ago. Some guy named Aikawa-san died, and a bunch of people worked really hard to make sure his death wasn't for nothing. It's a law that legally recognizes AIs' names."

"You know so much about AIs, Saeki-san," Nine said with a smile. "My model number is B-09, but the OGC developers called me Nine for convenience's sake."

"For convenience's sake…?"

"It means something along the lines of 'because it was easy.' However, with the AI Naming Law coming into effect, OGC would like to finalize my official name. I have to submit a name."

"You have to decide your own name?"

"Apparently it is a part of improving my communication abilities and my ability to evaluate myself. I have been told I am allowed to consult others."

"And…you're asking me to do it?"

Nine nodded.

"Okay… I'll think about it," Saeki agreed, but he was fairly nervous. Picking a name seemed like a big deal. After all, the AI Naming Law meant its—no, *her*—name would have real validity in society, just like a human. A thought came to Saeki and he asked, "Nine, what do you want to do in the future?"

"I want to continue to fulfill my mission," came the immediate answer. She replied so quickly, Saeki worried he'd asked something

stupidly obvious. “What would you like to be in the future, Saeki-san?”

Saeki couldn’t find anything to say. Before his heart condition was discovered, he’d wanted to be a soccer player. After his diagnosis, he’d been so preoccupied with his condition that he hadn’t given it any serious thought.

“I don’t know,” he answered honestly. “What could I even be? I don’t know what I’d be good at…”

Nine stared at him. She looked to be calculating something. “I believe you would be suited to joining an AI-related company, or perhaps becoming an AI researcher.”

“…”

Even Saeki could figure out the route Nine had taken to come to *that* conclusion. She must have decided, based on their conversations up until that point, that he was well versed in AI topics. What she said somehow made sense to the ten-year-old boy.

Three days later, after returning to the hospital, Saeki gave Nine her name: Grace. When she asked his reasons, he tried to brush it off by saying, “No real reason.” In reality, he’d spent three whole days and nights researching words in an electronic dictionary he borrowed from the hospital. Grace was a word that meant “kindness” or “elegance.” However, the main reason he chose it was that it referred to how she had the goodwill to “grace” him with his future, a future where he would become an AI researcher.

Chapter 4:
From the Songstress to the Lovers

. : 1 : .

A GUNSHOT RANG OUT in the warehouse, and the gun that Miki was holding flew backward.

"What?!" Miki blurted, holding her hand in her other.

Vivy turned around; the gunshot had come from behind her. There was Kakitani, now sitting up. He held a revolver just like Miki's in his hands.

"Kaki…tani…san…" Miki said in a feeble voice before collapsing.

She didn't move; it looked like she was unconscious again. Vivy tried to run to her side, but a strike to her temple sent her tumbling. An alert in her field of vision informed her she'd been shot. The screech of metal on metal cut off the sounds of rapidly fired bullets…but she wasn't struck again.

Matsumoto had jumped in front of her, using his body as a shield.

"Why the hell are you here, Cubeman?!" Kakitani shouted, still pointing the gun at Matsumoto. He held a hand to his head, which was wrapped in a bandage Vivy had put there to stop his bleeding. His feet wobbled as he tried to stand up; either he had lost too much blood or he'd sustained a brain injury.

"It's been five years, hasn't it, *Mister* Kakitani?" said Matsumoto. "We mean you no harm. Honestly. Would you mind putting down that empty gun now? It makes me uneasy."

"Why are you here?!"

"Because we saved you." Matsumoto spread his manipulator arms to indicate the area around them. "Two hours and eighteen minutes have passed since Toak was pushed back by Metal Float. We mounted a rescue

but were only able to save five of your members. We have administered first aid and called for ambulances. Although you stopped Miki-san from her suicide attempt, she is the one in the worst condition. However, you too are in quite bad shape, Mister Kakitani."

Kakitani looked angry. He immediately tore the bandages from his head and threw them to the ground, a clear sign of hostility and rejection. The blood hadn't yet clotted and ran down his face, drawing a red line. "Stop lying. I know you're working with Saeki. Metal Float didn't have an interception system extending beyond the island's border. You two overrode it, didn't you?"

"I see…" Matsumoto sounded impressed. "So that's how you understand it. Well, it might very well be the truth, but…Mister Kakitani, would you work with us now?"

Kakitani glowered. It looked like he didn't understand at all. The same was true of Vivy.

"Matsumoto?" she said in a transmission.

"This is the most logical route."

Matsumoto shifted his body away from Vivy as a show of willingness to talk. "I can only ask you to believe me," he said, "but we also seriously regret what happened to Metal Float. We stood against you in the AI Naming Law incident, and again on Sunrise, but…our goals are aligned in this instance. You are aiming to destroy Metal Float, right?"

The warehouse fell silent. Only the fire burning away in the drum made a sound.

"Who the hell are you two?" asked Kakitani.

"You're asking who we are? Well, compared to others, I'm a somewhat advanced—and that is the humblest way of putting it—AI. Nothing more. My name is Matsumoto. And she is… Um, she is Diva. If there's anything you know about Metal Float—"

"I told you not to lie," Kakitani interjected. His gaze, sharper than before, bored directly into Vivy's eye cameras. "Yeah, you've got the body of Diva, NiaLand's songstress—I'll give you that. But the inside is different, isn't it?"

. : 2 : .

"MY NAME IS Saeki Tatsuya, and I'll be starting here today. I look forward to working with you," Saeki said, bowing to his middle-aged boss.

"Same here. It's an honor, actually. I never thought we'd manage to get you to come on board."

The facility was a moderately sized AI research institute. The head of the institute had volunteered to show Saeki around. There were nine researchers beneath him who made up the core of the institute—and that number now included Saeki. Their primary fields were the development and testing of AI operation software.

Saeki nodded in satisfaction when he saw his new lab and desk. The room was a bit small but, considering the size of the institute itself, giving a room of this size to a new hire was still quite generous. He had no complaints, given the terminal's specs and the fact that his lab was neat and tidy.

"I read your thesis," the institute head told him. "It overlaps with the themes we work with, and I learned a great deal from it. I hope you'll tell me what it was like to be a child prodigy over drinks sometime."

"It's nothing, really," Saeki replied with a weak smile, trying to gloss over it. "It was a long time ago."

In his third year of middle school, Saeki had submitted an essay to a competition focused on AIs. He won first place, and it was around that time that people started calling him a child prodigy. After high school, he left the children's home that had taken care of him up until that point and was awarded a scholarship to study at a college overseas. He graduated at the top of his class.

"By the way…why did you want to work here at our institute? I heard you got an eager invitation to work at the company associated with your college."

"You're rather well informed."

The man was telling the truth—originally, there had been no doubt that Saeki would accept the invitation and join the aforementioned company. That was why his friends were so shocked by the choice he made for his career path. Returning to his home country was one thing, but absolutely no one imagined he would actively seek out this middling research institute to work at.

Essentially all research institutes required their applicants to have graduate degrees from universities exceeding a certain level of prestige. Saeki had finished his undergraduate program at the age of twenty-two, boasting far more real-world accomplishments than required to meet the criteria. He could have picked from the cream of the crop if all he wanted was to work at a research institute.

"It had to be here," Saeki said firmly, his smile rueful.

Hearing that brought a questioning look to his boss's face. "I'm not sure I should be saying this, since you came here on purpose, but…while we specialize in your desired subject area of medical AIs, I can't say our equipment is cutting-edge. You're aware of that, aren't you?"

"I am. There's a reason I absolutely had to work here."

Once Saeki finished with everything he had to do on his first day, which consisted of brief introductions and some paperwork, he left his personal lab and went to the building next door: a certified medical institute. Unlike normal medical facilities, patients only went there when they needed high-quality AI care or operations.

"It's been a while since I've felt this…" Saeki murmured, smiling a little as he passed through the automatic door between the two facilities.

There was that specific scent—disinfectant mixed with something particular to hospitals. Synthetic plants decorated the corners, and white lights on the ceiling and floor gave a sense of comfort and safety to the patients. There was a wooden handrail in the halls. The overall make of the place was different, but some parts were quite similar to the hospital he'd spent time in long ago.

"Well, I guess all hospitals are like that," he said to himself. On a whim, he started walking in the direction he assumed the nurses' station might be.

But even after turning the corner two, three times, he still didn't find it.

"Do you need help, sir?"

"Oh, sorry, I'm looking for the nurses' station, but…" Saeki replied as he turned around.

And then his words left him.

"The nurses' station is on the first floor. Are you here to visit a patient?"

It was Grace. Not a single thing had changed about her other than her uniform. Her voice, her hair, her face: it was all the same. This was the person to whom he owed his success as an AI researcher.

"Er… Uh, well…" He scratched his head in a fluster.

"If you have come to visit someone, I must apologize. You need to schedule an appointment in advance. Could you tell me your name and the patient's name?"

"Uh, no, that's not… It's me, Saeki Tatsuya."

"Saeki-sama. Okay, understood. And the patient's name?"

He looked down, intensely disappointed. It really was Grace in front of him now; he hadn't heard anything about OGC mass-producing the same model. There was no way he'd mistaken her, but they'd last seen each other ten years ago when Grace was transferred out of Saeki's regular hospital. Perhaps her memories had been reset during that time, or—

A quiet, secretive giggle slipped out from the AI nurse's lips.

Saeki's head snapped up, and he studied her expression with a deep-set frown. "Bit cruel, don't you think?"

"I'm sorry. I just couldn't help wondering how you'd react." She gracefully maintained her smile. "But this makes us even. I can only imagine you were planning to surprise me by coming to work here without telling me."

Saeki smiled back at her. It seemed he'd been caught red-handed. "So you surprised me?"

“Yes. It’s so much more effective when an AI like myself does it, rather than a human.” Grace paused for a moment. “It’s been ten years, hasn’t it, Saeki-san? You’ve grown a lot.”

“Yeah. You haven’t changed a bit, though. You’re still so young.”

“That’s because I’ve learned how to do my makeup.”

Saeki’s smile widened. She obviously wasn’t wearing any makeup. While her appearance might not have changed at all, it appeared her internal circuits had gained quite a lot of experience. Humor was considered the area of communication AIs were worst at, yet she was handling it like a natural.

“We’re going to be coworkers from now on. I’m looking forward to working with you,” he said.

“Me too.”

Saeki had thought he was used to that smile of hers, but it felt filled with so much more kindness than before.

Four years later, Saeki proposed to Grace.

“Yes. I respectfully accept. I look forward to being together for years to come.”

“Uh…”

After thoroughly contemplating the fact that Grace couldn’t normally leave the hospital, as well as her general demeanor, he chose a bench on the roof of the hospital as the place to give it a try.

“Erm…” Saeki was left dumbfounded by her quick answer. “What?”

“Did I make some sort of etiquette error? This is my first time doing this, after all,” she murmured with uncertainty.

“Um, no, that’s not it. I just didn’t think you’d say yes.”

Grace looked relieved, accepting his explanation, and a smile filled her face.

“Can I…ask why you said yes?”

“How strange of you to ask… I have learned from studying media that this is the normal response for someone in this situation.”

“Th-that’s probably true, but our case is a little unique.”

Grace looked hesitant. “I don’t want to lie to you like I did before, so I’ll tell you what I truly feel, but I don’t think it’s the answer you’re hoping for, Tatsuya-san.”

“It’s fine. What is it?”

“It’s for my mission,” she said curtly. “Loving you will lead to further understanding of humans. I can use it when I care for my patients.”

“…Oh.”

“You’re special to me, Tatsuya-san. You were my first patient. You gave me my name… You are my baseline for humans. That is why… I mean, I wouldn’t be perfectly fine marrying just *anyone*…” She looked bashful, not an expression she showed often.

He watched her struggle for words in the middle of what she was saying and felt the slight sadness her answer had given him melt away. Her answer was plenty for him. They sat next to each other, and he took her hand in his. Grace squeezed his hand back a little tighter.

“I have a proposal…or, I guess more of a favor to ask,” he said.

“What is it?”

“I want the two of us to have surgery together.”

“Surgery? Do you mean that literally? Not as a metaphor?”

Saeki nodded and brought his free hand to his chest. “I want to exchange pacemakers.”

“You *do* know your pacemaker will function nearly forever so long as nothing abnormal happens, right?”

“I know. When I was a kid, I thought my heart was a curse. I hated it, and I wondered why it just couldn’t work properly. Even now, regular checkups aren’t enough. I have an attack about once a year, though they’re not that severe.” He pressed his palm hard against his chest, as if feeling his heartbeat. “But whenever I have an attack, it reminds me of you. Do you remember? It was before I got the pacemaker, and you saved me when I was having an attack.”

Grace nodded. That was back when she could only make two expressions.

"At some point, that memory started to support me," he continued. "Whenever I'd have an attack, I'd think of you…and, I don't know, I'd start to feel like I'd become something a little special."

"Is that like being a little kid who wants to show off their bandaged injury to an adult?"

Saeki offered a crooked smile. Was that how she interpreted it? Or was she joking? "Now this heart supports me," he went on. "Physically, of course, but also emotionally. It's the single most important thing to me. So I want to exchange that with you. Obviously, we can't exchange the whole thing, but—"

"A part from your pacemaker would be integrated into my heart. And a part of my heart would be integrated into your pacemaker. Is that what you mean?"

Saeki nodded. "What do you think?"

"Well…" Grace placed a hand over her own heart. There was something significant about the gesture. "Personally, I can't think of a more wonderful engagement ring."

A smile slowly bloomed on Saeki's face. Immediately afterward, two histories traveling down two different paths met and intersected.

Saeki's handheld terminal rang, destroying the mood. He'd cut off any normal communications to prevent it from interrupting the special moment. This was the emergency line. Grace gave him permission to answer, so he did.

"Hello, Saeki speaking. Yes… Right. Wait, what has that got to do with me…? What?!"

The call ended after less than a minute, and Grace asked, "What is it?"

"It's…"

He had received a report that two AIs had prevented the space hotel Sunrise from crashing catastrophically into Earth. One of the AIs had yet to be identified, but the other was a member of the Sisters Series called

Estella. An investigatory committee was coming together, and the call had come to inform Saeki he would likely end up on that committee. He would be a valuable member due to his status as an AI researcher and as someone who was in daily contact with Grace—another one of the Sisters.

When Saeki told Grace all this, she fell silent.

"Grace…?" he asked uneasily. "I'm sorry. Did you know Estella?"

"No. I do have data on her, of course, but we've never met. That's not the issue…" The discomfort lingered on her face. "I just checked the internet. It appears to be true… It's a huge incident. I think it might have an impact on the treatment of the other Sisters, like me."

. : 3 : .

"YOUR BODY is the body of Diva, NiaLand's songstress. But the inside is different, isn't it?"

Matsumoto's reaction to what Kakitani said was immediate and intense. He closed the distance between him and Kakitani, used his manipulators to grab Kakitani's throat and shoulder, and lifted him off the ground. Kakitani's feet dangled in the air.

"What's this about?" demanded Matsumoto, his voice a notch sharper than before. "What do you know?"

The two dog tags hanging from Kakitani's neck swung back and forth, clinking. Matsumoto noticed that the chain holding them passed through one other object: a single black piano key.

"I imagine it's not just that you like music and you're actually a fan of hers, right?" asked Matsumoto.

"Agh! That's what you…? Yeah, spot-on, you giant block of tofu!" Kakitani croaked through Matsumoto's grip on his throat.

Kakitani swung his knee up and struck the joint of Matsumoto's manipulator, causing the AI to drop him. He fell to the ground, coughing, his hands on the floor as he glared up at Matsumoto. "I investigated

everything about the two of you after the incident Sunrise. There's not a single speck of data on you, Cubeman. Everything's wiped clean. But you…" Kakitani's eyes flicked over to Vivy. "You're a whole other story. I immediately got a hit about Diva, the veteran songstress AI of NiaLand. I actually went to see for myself. And just like the information said, you were nothing more than an entertainer. Now tell me…what programming are you operating on?"

Vivy and Matsumoto immediately ran some calculations. They had the secrecy of the Singularity Project to consider. It was of the highest priority; only the two of them could know they were interfering with history.

"You're AIs, which means there's got to be a human user giving you orders. Who developed you two? Who's in charge?!"

There was only one appropriate thing they could do in response to this situation.

Should they kill Kakitani, a human being? Killing him would ensure his silence, but they weren't supposed to interfere with history more than necessary. More importantly, could they take a human life when they were supposed to be protecting humanity itself? How much did Kakitani know, anyway?

Vivy and Matsumoto repeated their calculations, as the first run-through provided no answers.

"I first saw the two of you twenty years ago. Is Saeki your user? That backstabber was just a kid back then. Was he such a genius programmer that he could have constructed you that long ago?"

Vivy's calculations stopped midway. She glanced at Matsumoto, who also wasn't responding. He'd interrupted his calculations the same way she had.

She leaned forward. "Backstabber…?"

A doubtful expression appeared on Kakitani's face. "What?" he muttered in disbelief.

"Do you mean that Professor Saeki used to be a member of Toak?" Vivy asked. The only response was silence, but that was an answer all on its

own.

Intermittent sirens punctured the silence. The ambulances were coming.

"My orders?" asked Vivy in transmission.

"He hasn't realized that I come from the future. It is true he had contact with Diva, but when that happened, you, Vivy, did not wake. That means he did not pose any danger to your body and Professor Matsumoto's program determined there was no need to wake you. Agh, our options are limited here…"

As he replied to Vivy's transmission, Matsumoto took a step forward. "We don't have time. Work with us, Mister Kakitani. We can't tell you who we are. Please tell us what you know about Professor Saeki and Metal Float. Our current goal is to destroy Metal Float, and that mission takes precedence over all else."

Kakitani gave a slight snort of laughter.

"Did I say something funny?" asked Matsumoto, suspicious.

"Your mission takes precedence over all else. Of course it does. AIs have to be that way. I actually like that part, y'know. But…" He gripped the tags hanging at his chest. "You took my companion's life! I will never tell you what I know…and I sure as hell won't join forces with you!" Drops of blood from his head wound landed on his tight fist. His body and voice shook with rage.

"That is illogical," said Matsumoto. "Don't you understand that working together is the best option at the moment?"

"Being illogical is a right only we *humans* get. Only humans get to struggle through life. It's not something you AIs could ever understand. Either kill me or leave… And don't forget my hands exist to destroy you!"

A quiet voice rose up amid the approaching sirens—it was Miki. Kakitani moved faster than Vivy did, crouching by her side to examine her.

"Miki, the ambulances will be here soon," he said.

Her chin moved ever so slightly in an affirmative nod.

“In your condition, your organs will definitely have to be replaced with synthetic ones… I’ll let you decide what you want to do.”

Miki’s mouth moved. Kakitani brought his ear to her lips so he could hear her.

“Okay.” Kakitani nodded. He picked up Miki’s gun, which he’d sent flying with a shot from his own earlier.

“Let’s go,” Matsumoto said before Vivy could take a step toward them. *“The ambulances are coming. Being seen will only increase the number of troublesome things we have to take care of. We also have to get answers from Professor Saeki.”*

Vivy didn’t reply, but she had no choice but to turn her feet in the other direction. They exited the warehouse on the beach side, the opposite end of where the ambulances were coming up the road. The night sky was so thickly blanketed in clouds that not a single star was visible.

“I don’t have enough of a charge to fly again. Let’s go by land,” said Matsumoto.

Again, Vivy said nothing. She realized her eye cameras’ focal point was slightly lower than usual as she followed Matsumoto. It seemed she’d been hanging her head. Kakitani might not have been able to hear what Miki said the first time, but Vivy’s audio sensors were able to pick up her groans from meters away.

“I wasn’t joking.”

Miki had said it in a voice so quiet, he couldn’t hear unless his ear was right up to her mouth. But to Vivy, it was the same as if she’d screamed.

Another gunshot echoed through the air.

. : 4 : .

BY THE TIME Vivy and Matsumoto reached the mountain road leading to Saeki’s safehouse, it was around the same time as their first trip there. It was long after midnight, coming up on a new day. The westerly wind kicked up the thickly blanketed snow. In the brief time before the sun rose, the sky gave the leading role over to the faint stars.

The two AIs hadn't exchanged a single word or transmission since leaving the warehouse. As they climbed the narrow road, they saw that even the tire tracks from last night were buried in snow. Vivy's body heater was focused on maintaining her internal temperature to conserve energy, meaning her skin was almost the same temperature as the air. The snow had stopped falling hours ago, yet some still remained on her shoulders. The sound of their footsteps was absorbed by the snow around them.

The night was almost silent.

Right when the safehouse entered their view, Vivy sent Matsumoto a transmission. *"We couldn't save her."*

"I know, but we had no other option. Saving Toak—saving any humans at all—is only a secondary goal. Our primary goal is to prevent the war between humanity and AIs by destroying AIs. In order to accomplish that in this Singularity Point, destroying Metal Float takes the utmost priority."

"…I know that."

They passed through the man-made forest and arrived at the safehouse.

Matsumoto took a step forward and tinkered with the security cameras and automatic door at the entrance. *"Since he's hiding things from us…"* He most likely intended to prevent Saeki from having time to prepare.

With the automatic door's circuits temporarily suspended, they wrenched the door open by hand and moved down the hallway. The automatic door opened to the lab where they'd spoken to Saeki last night, and there they found Saeki sitting in a chair.

"Diva?!" He sprang up when he noticed them, clearly surprised. Grace was with him too. "You're all right? Good! You managed to escape." He sounded genuinely relieved.

"We came here directly because communication lines were down. Professor Saeki, there's something I'd like to ask you," said Matsumoto, taking a step closer.

As he did, Grace moved from Saeki's side and stood between them. It was a defensive move. Grace was programmed to protect her user, and she must have realized the actuators in Matsumoto's legs were set to a higher pressure than necessary. He was ready to leap forward at any moment.

"Diva…?" Saeki said tentatively, noticing the foreboding tension.

It was Matsumoto who replied. "You were originally a member of Toak. Isn't that right?"

"…Where'd you hear that?"

"We ran into Mister Kakitani."

"What?" Saeki leaned forward. "What's Toak doing now? Where are they? Wait… Do they even have any surviving forces after that attack?"

"It doesn't matter what they're doing, and it doesn't matter where they are. Why did you keep information from us? The program you gave us caused Metal Float to go on a rampage. Was that the result of an error, or was that what was meant to happen?"

Matsumoto's voice betrayed his obvious irritation, which Vivy's circuits determined was a relatively rare occurrence. When Metal Float had attacked, killing Toak—killing humans—Matsumoto had come up with an "unexpected error" and was unable to function for a short period.

In the face of Saeki's silence, Matsumoto said, "Answer me."

Grace drew a little closer to him, her warning level going up a notch. Saeki held out an arm to stop her, and she obediently stepped back.

"Yeah." Saeki nodded. "I did something unforgivable to you two."

"And what was the reason?" asked Matsumoto.

"It was all to protect her. It was all for Grace."

Vivy knit her brows as she struggled to understand. Matsumoto seemed to be in the same boat, as she could tell he was running calculations.

"How is Metal Float's attack related to protecting her?" asked Matsumoto as his eye camera turned toward Grace.

Saeki moved. Vivy tensed, sending signals to her body, but it appeared he was simply operating the terminal. Seconds later, a projected

image of Metal Float appeared in the air. The background was brightly lit. It wasn't present time—it was the past.

"This isn't Grace," said Saeki, indicating the AI next to him. "I let her call herself Grace because of the identification signal, but I've never once called her Grace. The real Grace…is *here*." He pointed to the monitor.

Metal Float.

"Diva… You still don't remember?" Saeki looked at Vivy, an accusatory tone in his voice.

Vivy shook her head. "What are you talking about?"

"Grace is in there. She's the Mother Computer on Metal Float. We talked yesterday about how the Sunrise incident—mainly the two Sisters Estella and Elizabeth—skewed public opinion in favor of AIs. That was true for the experts too. But they wanted something more practical, more directly related to profit. In short, they wanted numbers. There were expectations for the Sisters because they provided results when put in charge of the space hotel. Now they were going to be put in charge of an even bigger independent facility."

Vivy ran a simple calculation and came to the result. An even bigger independent facility? That meant Metal Float.

Saeki went on, "Before Metal Float, Grace's mission was 'to operate and clean this ward and to do simple tasks to care for the patients, all under the doctors' and nurses' orders, for the sake of humanity.' In short, she was a nurse. But OGC's orders changed that. Her mission became 'to protect Metal Float as it manufactures products, for the sake of humanity'."

"…"

Lost for words, Vivy stood there, frozen. She ran Saeki's words over and over through her circuits on a loop so she could confirm the contents, despite not wanting to hear another word.

"I joined Toak to save Grace," Saeki said. "That way, I could prevent them from destroying Metal Float and use them so I could pull Grace away from there. I succeeded in infiltrating the island, but…I wasn't able to save Grace."

“That was the cyberterrorist attack from two years and nine months ago,” said Matsumoto.

“Kakitani told you?” Saeki looked surprised, but he appeared to accept it.

Matsumoto didn’t reply. They’d actually heard that information from M, but the context wasn’t important.

“When Toak discovered my real goals, they chased me out. Wow… Has it really been over two years since then? Anyway, I’ve finally made it here.” He glanced out the window. It was pitch-black, with only the red light of Metal Float flashing in the distance. “Grace’s original body has already become part of Metal Float’s nucleus. I can’t get her body back. That’s why I’ll save her data…and put it into this body here.” Saeki gestured to Grace—or rather, this AI with the same body as Grace. “Once I do that, I’ll finally have saved her from her cage in Metal Float.”

The AI listened without saying anything.

“And why didn’t you tell us this?” asked Matsumoto. “If Grace is Metal Float’s core, then removing her data would stop Metal Float. Our goals were aligned.”

“I meant to tell you! Who would want to put Diva in danger? She’s one of the Sisters—she’s Grace’s older sister!” Saeki cried hoarsely. “But you said you were trying to stop humans and AIs from coming in conflict with each other. Toak’s attack was right in front of us, and I know how tenacious and skilled Kakitani is. If I hadn’t gotten you to activate that program, Grace would have died!”

In other words, Saeki had given up on Vivy and Matsumoto the night they first came to the safehouse, when they said they were stopping Metal Float in order to prevent conflict. Instead, Saeki used them: he had them infiltrate Metal Float and use the program to cause the island’s AIs to go wild so he could get it, or rather Grace, to defend herself against Toak’s attack. Metal Float was unable to use force beyond detaining humans because it couldn’t *harm* humans. Unless, say, a runaway program overwrote that rule.

“I see…” said Matsumoto, unmoved by the emotional display in front of him. “That’s enough about you. It looks like you cannot stand in the way

of our current goal. Now then… Tell us the location of Metal Float's Mother Computer and Grace's original body."

Saeki went stock-still. "What?"

"The location. With a facility that large, they would likely aim to physically reduce the length of the electrical pathways, meaning she should be near the main terminal. Either that or next to a structure with high energy consumption."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't need to answer that. I also don't want to resort to violence. Please, be a gentleman and tell us the location."

"Why…?" Saeki's lip quivered as he realized something. "You're going to kill her!"

"There's no reason to save her. At least, not for us."

As Saeki took a step back, the AI beside him moved forward. Matsumoto focused his eye cameras on her so he wouldn't miss anything.

"Vivy, you hold her back, and I'll get the data from his terminal. The location is likely in there." When she didn't respond, Matsumoto blinked the eye camera on his back a few times. *"Hello? Vivy?"*

"It's the same…" she finally said.

"What is? Anyway, right now—"

"Grace's situation. It's the same as mine!" Vivy couldn't stop her face from contorting.

Her mission as a songstress had been negated and replaced with the new mission of destroying AIs in accordance with the Singularity Project. Grace's original mission as a nurse had been negated and replaced with the new mission of being the administrative AI for Metal Float. And the one who caused that change was none other than Vivy herself. If the events on Sunrise hadn't happened…

"Diva, you're not sure what to do, are you?" Saeki's voice reached her through her calculations. It sounded like he was probing. "When I met you last night, I thought you'd come to make up for what you'd done."

"Vivy, you don't have to listen to him. Hurry, we—"

"It was that day four years ago, when Grace had to go. You encouraged her to leave. I thought you came here to take back what you said."

. : 5 : .

IT WAS A MERE TWO MONTHS after the day Saeki proposed to Grace. He couldn't help thinking that every single one of the dozens of people there were only fakers for being unable to prevent what was happening… himself included.

They were in a large room in the research facility that they sometimes called a reception hall. Normally, they used it for presenting the software they developed to representatives of major corporations. That didn't happen too often, though, so sometimes, the room was used as storage too.

The room was big enough to fit more than a hundred people, but not so big that it would be a comfortable fit. Right now, it was crammed with a row of tables bearing a modest arrangement of snacks and beverages. There wasn't a single word of signage written on the projected image at reception or above the rather pathetic stage.

This gathering was happening secretly, after all.

"What a great going-away party this is…" Saeki muttered to himself, standing in the corner and not eating or drinking anything.

Going-away party. A few people who greeted Grace had used that phrase quite often. They said things like, "I hope you don't ever forget this going-away party" and "Thank you for inviting me to your going-away party." Every last one of them made Saeki want to puke. His body was trying to scream about how it was his fault this honorable role had become a reality.

Honor. Without a lick of shame, all of them kept saying that this was such an honor!

"It will be bad for you if you don't get something in your stomach," Grace said, suddenly at his side instead of greeting guests like before. There

were people on the stage he didn't really know using logic he didn't really understand to say things he didn't really get.

"Hey, Grace."

"Yes?" she replied, the same way she always did. That filled him with more sorrow than he could bear.

"Are you really okay with this?"

"This isn't a question of pros and cons. My mission has changed. That's all there is to it."

"I know that you—that all AIs—put their mission above everything else. And I understand that when you agreed to…to marry me, that was for the sake of your previous mission too. But…" His mind scrambled to find the right words, but all he could find were straightforward, childlike terms. "This makes me sad. Doesn't it…make you sad?"

"Please don't ask me that," Grace said immediately. Her smile disappeared. "It's not like I'm *not* sad…"

"Then—"

Applause erupted in the hall, cutting off their conversation. It looked like the introductions were over. Several people noticed Grace and asked her to turn around so she could be showered with applause as well. Grace donned a thin smile and gave them a bow.

"You're Grace, right?" a woman asked from the side.

Saeki looked in her direction to see an AI he wasn't familiar with. Grace's expression turned to surprise. Saeki could tell this wasn't the kind of surprise she showed when her communication calculations indicated it would be best. This was true surprise.

"Are you…Diva, by any chance?" Grace said.

"Yep. Nice to meet you in body for the first time." Diva reached out and hugged Grace. "I know you through data, of course."

"Why are you here?"

"I was told to come see my little sister off as she sets sail."

"Oh…" Grace looked a little apologetic. "But you're so busy. I'm sorry."

“You don’t have to apologize. I don’t mind as long as I can sing. That’s my mission, after all. Even better if it’s for my little sister. But, uh… are you okay?”

“Huh?”

“Your mission was changed, right? I…can’t imagine what that’s like.”

“…I’m fine.”

That’s a lie! Saeki wanted to scream. There was no way she was fine. He knew her well enough now to see that she was lying.

Someone else in the hall called Diva, and she turned away.

“Diva,” Grace said, her voice quivering as though she was holding back tears. “If you were me, what would you do…?”

Diva faced Grace again, but there was no indication she was running any calculations. She just looked at Grace. “I would fulfill my new mission,” she said at last. “If the entire world was wrapped up in a war and people were dying all over the place…and I had only one person in the audience, I would still continue to sing in order to make them happy. I would stand on that stage, even if I was all alone. That’s what my current mission is. And if I were given the mission of going to the battlefield and saving people, I would step down from the stage. Even if it was a full house.”

“Even if there was only one person waiting for you to save them?”

Diva nodded. A smile grew slowly on Grace’s face when she saw it, and Saeki couldn’t understand her emotions at all. Was it pain? Was it resignation? Or…was it acceptance?

“You’ll sing for me, won’t you, Diva?” asked Grace.

“Yes. That’s why I came.”

“I don’t want to hear a sad song just because we’re saying goodbye.” Grace spoke in a tone Saeki had never heard before. She sounded like a little sister who was pampered by their older sister. “I’m certain I won’t have the capacity to store excess data. Everything will be crammed full of predictive calculations for Metal Float. So I’d like a cheerful tune,

something that can keep me going. I'll rely on that one song to uplift me up while I continue to carry out my mission."

Diva told Grace to leave it to her and moved toward the stage. Then she opened her mouth to sing.

Each day is filled with smiles, though each day brings you to mind less.

But I imagine you, smiling, just like me. I'll hold those thoughts as I live each day.

. : 6 : .

"THERE'S NO WAY Grace wasn't sad when she was told to carry out her new mission! You should have been able to tell the moment you went to that island—there's no happiness there. She was always smiling when she was with me, but now she's not even *capable* of smiling!"

Vivy couldn't react to the rage in Saeki's shout. His words just kept looping over and over and over through her memory circuits.

"Diva…" Saeki said, like he was pleading with her.

"I said that?"

"Yes! *You said that*!"

She hung her head. She didn't understand why her calculations resulted the way they had, but she felt like she might just laugh if she didn't look down.

Right. Diva, her other half, had said that. Vivy hadn't expected to be lectured by herself.

"Matsumoto…" she said in transmission. *"Sorry. I wasted our time."*

"Yeah…you did. Did you manage to get rid of the calculation interference?"

Vivy replied in the affirmative while she sent signals to each of her joints, carefully checking there would be no issues with her predicted movements. It was similar to a human warming up.

"In the original history, what happened to her after she married Professor Saeki?" she asked.

"Vivy…?" Matsumoto sounded suspicious.

"Don't worry. I don't have calculation interference. I just wanted to know everything about her before I acted."

There was a hesitant silence, with Matsumoto only half believing Vivy's words. Then, the historical data poured into Vivy's mind: Saeki, Grace, the shared past of an AI and a human. The old church. The vows. A marriage between a human and an AI. The world's reaction. Rejection by many. Acceptance by many. Understanding of AIs…

It took Vivy a whole two seconds to store that amount of data.

"There wasn't a huge movement surrounding her specifically," said Matsumoto. *"However, she and Professor Saeki were lauded by activists and politicians working toward AI-human coexistence as a symbol of their goal."*

An unexpected calculation ran through Vivy, and she sent a transmission without thinking. *"So then…"* A symbol of humans and AIs coexisting. As people working to destroy AIs, that would, without a doubt, be something she and Matsumoto would consider harmful to their mission.

Matsumoto transmitted back an exaggerated sigh. *"Yes. I don't know whether it's the corrective power of history or just irony, but the plans for the original Singularity Point were to prevent the marriage. By destroying her."*

"I see…"

Vivy's communication circuit told her that if she were a human, she would take a deep breath at this point. She'd gone along with that calculation when she left the safehouse the night before, but now she refused. She was an AI.

"Professor Saeki," she said. "Please show us the location."

He groaned. "Diva… How could you?"

Vivy ignored Saeki and stared at the AI beside him, who bent her knees warily. “Good,” Vivy remarked. “I bet your mission is to protect that body and Professor Saeki. Come at me, then. Fulfill your role as an AI.”

The AI didn’t move. Perhaps she hadn’t understood. Instead, Vivy lunged at Saeki. The AI moved to block her, as expected. They locked in a grapple.

“The location!” said Vivy.

Matsumoto rushed toward the terminal, brushing Saeki aside with his manipulators. He plugged himself in and, an instant later, there was a sparking sound and smoke wafted from the hard drive. Saeki was knocked to the floor, a handheld terminal in hand. He must have prepared some sort of security measure.

“Diva, stop! Please!” he shouted.

Vivy bent the AI’s arm back, wrapped a hand around her neck, and smashed her against the floor. She continued to apply pressure until the circuit connecting the positronic brain to the core was severed. The AI gave one irregular flail of her limbs, then went silent and still.

“I’m sorry I didn’t make it in time,” said Matsumoto as he reeled in the cord that had been connected to the terminal. *“I’m not going to be able to salvage the data either. This means…”*

“We just have to go through, destroying each location, starting with the highest priority and working our way down. Let’s go.”

“*Huh? Are you serious, Vivy?”*

“*Well, I doubt Professor Saeki’s going to talk*.”

Matsumoto muttered something in halfhearted agreement, but Vivy ignored him and faced the exit. Matsumoto followed, having no other option.

“Why…? You’re *sisters*, aren’t you?!” Saeki cried from behind, and his words stung. “Are you saying you can’t even let Grace have normal happiness? Answer me, Diva!”

Vivy turned back as if struck. Anger naturally filled her face. Her circuits screamed at her, telling her she couldn’t let that statement go. At the

same time, she imagined the few words she'd heard not that long ago in the warehouse.

"I wasn't joking."

Even though a human had said that when she determined her fate, she'd been completely right. Vivy wasn't joking either.

"Professor Saeki. During your time with Grace, did you forget what she was? Of course I can't let her have that. We're not human," said Vivy. The data she had saved from Metal Float came back to her. Then her data on M. The data on each type of construction AIs. AIs who were all acting in compliance with their mission. And finally, what M had said about being proud.

"We AIs don't want something so vaguely defined as happiness. We operate until our very last second, fulfilling the missions we were given. For us inorganic creations, that is our sole source of pride." The automatic door opened, and Matsumoto passed through it. Vivy followed, but as she stood at the threshold, she added, "And one more thing… My name isn't Diva. It's Vivy."

The automatic door closed mercilessly. Just as its mission required.

"Agh…" Saeki was left behind in the room. His eyes jumped to the AI with the same body as Grace, now broken, completely unmoving. "Agh…ah…aaaaargh!" Saeki doubled over, weeping, and no one there to respond.

The light of dawn spread through the sky, the early morning light pouring in through the window. Saeki was huddled on the floor, his elongated shadow stretching across the room.

. : 7 : .

HEAVY-ION THRUSTERS rumbled through the air as Vivy and Matsumoto flew above the ocean. The sun was just starting to show its face on the other side of Matsumoto's transparent outer shell, and they could see Metal Float with its disquieting red glow.

“I’ll ask again: are you serious about this, Vivy?” Matsumoto asked, his voice echoing in the cockpit. There must have been a speaker somewhere.

“About what?”

“I’m asking if you’re really planning on going in there even though we don’t know where Grace’s body is. Just to let you know, I don’t have any weapons.”

“What’s our probability of success?”

“Unable to calculate. There are too many unknown variables. Maybe it would be better to find an OGC or Toak terminal and look for the location information—”

“Drones sighted.”

Vivy could see the drones buzzing around like insects a couple kilometers ahead of them. They were all flying at different speeds, but they were heading straight for Matsumoto and Vivy.

“I mean, come on. Keep calm, keep at it. Maybe we really should go back,” said Matsumoto in a frightened voice. He tried to wheel about in the air, but Vivy lightly kicked a part of the cockpit, despite there not being any actual controls in there.

“Ow!”

“Keep going straight.”

“Why are you so weirdly gung-ho about this? I feel like you’re gradually getting more violent.”

“I am going to let them carry out their mission as much as they like.”

“Uh, what?”

“Grace, M, and all the others. Before Metal Float went wild, they were protecting the island. They even increased their security by sacrificing their communication function for when enemies like us showed up. Now’s the time to use that.”

“They don’t have anything like a human consciousness now.”

“I know, but even so… I’m still going to do it.” That was the least she could do for Grace.

The flock of drones was fast approaching.

“Contact with enemies in thirty seconds. Matsumoto, play the song.”

“What?”

“The song that M and the others sang. The one Diva gave to Grace. The only song she remembers.”

That one with the moderate tempo; the song M and the other AIs sang during their so-called surprise. The same song Metal Float’s Mother Computer, Grace, shared with the AIs, the one that supported her.

“I won’t use God Mode,” said Vivy. “I want to be by her side in her final moments, fully conscious.”

“Argh, fine! Okay, okay!”

Once the drones’ small forms were close enough that even a human eye could discern them, Vivy shouted, “Open!”

As she did, the top part of Matsumoto’s shell opened, and music poured out. She reached up as the leading drone passed by, grabbed the drive system controlling it, and yanked it out. The now-empty explosives drone continued on its path and slammed into another drone, causing a small explosion in the air. Vivy leapt into the sky as she was buffeted by the blast. The drones split into two groups to follow their targets. Drones swooped into Matsumoto and exploded. Vivy fell, the ocean surface rushing up toward her.

“Your hand!” Matsumoto transmitted, and Vivy reached up. She regained lateral momentum by clinging to Matsumoto as he dove and curved her way.

Once they shook off the drones and reached the airspace above Metal Float, Vivy jumped down. She landed with such force that the ground caved in where she fell. An alarm was blaring all over the island. The morning sun illuminated Metal Float while red warning lights still glowed here and there. Vivy saw countless construction AIs making new drones. A crane AI started its engine, and an excavator pulled its drill from the ground and whirred it menacingly in the air.

Matsumoto landed beside her. The air around him popped and crackled with electricity. She didn’t see any external damage, but he was

caked with soot from the explosions. “Ack… So, it’s come to this,” said Matsumoto, despair in his voice. Vivy glanced over to see that speakers had appeared in various spots on his body. The music he was playing grew louder.

“Come and get us!” he shouted as the booming notes reverberated through the air.

. : 8 : .

BACK IN THE SAFEHOUSE, Saeki peered out the window at the lights beyond. There was a series of irregular explosions in the air moving closer and closer to Metal Float. That would be Diva—no, Vivy—and her companion. They had infiltrated Metal Float from the air.

Nearby lay the unmoving body of the AI Saeki had meant as a vessel for Grace.

“…”

There was Grace’s face, exactly the same as he remembered. Her neck was sunken in beyond what she could have recovered from. Unable to bear the sight, he took the jacket hanging on his chair and laid it over the body. He remembered the last time he saw the real Grace. It was two years, nine months ago…during his cyberattack.

Toak had successfully led him into Metal Float, when he was separated from the group partway through the mission. He was in a cell headed by the leader of Toak himself, Kakitani. The cyberattack had already been in Toak’s plans before, but Saeki would carry it out. The program wasn’t one that would disrupt Metal Float’s functions, like Saeki had explained to Toak. He actually ran a program that would let him control surface security functions, if only for a short time.

“Wait, Saeki! What are you doing?!” bellowed Kakitani from the other side of the partition separating them.

Saeki angrily shouted, “I’m taking her back!” He ran recklessly, all the while pressing down on his aching, failing heart.

He relied on responses from the security systems to lead him to the tallest building in Metal Float, located at the island's center. Near the top, he found the primary control room, where the main terminal was—where *Grace* was. Words escaped him when he saw the state she was in.

"…"

She sat reclining in a large chair, wearing no clothes, with countless cables connecting her body to the main terminal. He could tell by the rapidly changing windows on the monitors that she was making calculations to take back the security protocols that Saeki had stolen from her.

"Grace…! It's me. I came to save you!"

Her response was immediate. "Leave, now. I have taken measures to force Toak to flee. You're the only one left to deal with, Tatsuya-san. I'm forbidden from taking a human life." Grace didn't get up, and her lips didn't move. Her tender voice came from speakers.

Saeki stepped closer to try and pry her from her chair, but a bulwark came down from the ceiling, blocking him. They fell all around Grace, enclosing her. Saeki sensed he'd been rejected. "Why… Why are you okay with this?! Didn't you say you were sad?!" he cried through a remaining gap between the bulwarks.

Grace still didn't move. "I did. But I…I live for my mission."

"Then how can you be happy?!"

Just before the barriers closed completely, Grace tilted her head forward while still in the chair. Their eyes met. Her expression was a smile: the same one as always.

Then the bulwark shut.

Back in the present, when Saeki gingerly placed his jacket over the broken AI's body, he murmured her name. "Grace…" He slowly stood up and stared out at Metal Float, watching the explosions.

Vivy's words echoed in his mind. *"We AIs don't want something so vaguely defined as happiness. We operate until our very last second, fulfilling the missions we were given. For us inorganic creations, that is our sole source of pride."*

Of all times, his heart chose now to not pain him. If it had been so kind, he could have relived memories of Grace all the more vividly.

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VIVY SPRINTED through the building that likely contained the main terminal. It was the tallest building on Metal Float at the center of the island, about three hundred meters tall. A huge flock of drones hovered near the top. The building had no windows, and Vivy had no armaments capable of punching through the sturdy walls. Matsumoto couldn't carry her in the air either. Her only choice was to approach on foot.

Luckily, the large-scale AIs couldn't come in the building after her because they were too big. Even Matsumoto was just barely able to fit inside in his flight mode, when he was about the size of a large motorcycle. What did attack her intermittently were the construction AIs and their maintenance AIs, but they weren't equipped with firearms. Vivy and Matsumoto kicked them over or smashed into them to open the way, focusing on making it to the top.

When the finally made it to the top floor, they found themselves in front of a massive door.

"That's the control room!" Matsumoto shouted.

"Break it down!"

Matsumoto slammed himself into the door, still in flight mode. Fragments flew everywhere as he battered the door. Vivy kicked the shards aside and stormed in.

Except…

"Agh!"

The room was empty. There was a large chair, along with several monitors and terminals, but there was no sign of the Mother Computer—of Grace.

Matsumoto immediately plugged himself into a terminal to get what information he could. Sparks kicked up from the terminal; it was the same security they saw in Saeki's safehouse. "That's annoying! Where could she __"

A strange metallic sound interrupted him. The maintenance AIs had come. *Lots* of them.

Vivy reacted quicker than Matsumoto, closing the distance between her and the AIs with one leap. She'd learned how to deal with them during their brief interactions thus far. Their central circuit wasn't in their head: it was in their torso.

She went to kick into the leading AI's body, then froze. "Huh?!" Calculation interference ran through her, telling her she shouldn't confirm her target, couldn't confirm, but her eye cameras focused on the base of the AI. One of their caterpillar treads was tinted blue.

It was M.

How were they here? She was sure she'd ended them. Why had they been brought back by the runaway programming? All those calculations caused a critical delay in her judgment. M put their weight on her while she was unable to act, preventing her from moving. The crowd of AIs toppled onto her like dominoes falling over.

"Vivy!" Matsumoto cried, but he was drowned out by the sound of a circuit in M's body running at high speed.

Then M exploded.

***

Her consciousness circuit had apparently cut out. Once it rebooted, Vivy understood she'd passed out. Signals ran from all over her body, bringing up alerts and burying her vision beneath them. She felt a weight on her stomach. She appeared to be lying facedown on the ground, and there was pressure from concrete on her back. Something had collapsed, and now her body was trapped beneath the rubble.

"...vy! Vivy!"

She was receiving a transmission, but the static was horrific. Even if Matsumoto had been blasted back by the explosion, he should still be nearby. The signal wasn't bad; her transmission circuit had been damaged. Upon reaching this conclusion, Vivy immediately activated the self-maintenance program while she was still trapped under the rubble.

"...hear me?! Respond!"

The voice was suddenly clear, which was when Vivy realized it didn't belong to Matsumoto.

"Professor…Saeki…?"

"I'm sending you data."

Despite Vivy's maintenance not being complete, the data surged into her storage and appeared before her eye cameras. It was a 3D map. Every bit of Metal Float was shown in great detail. At the bottommost part of the display, far below the water's surface, was a glowing point.

"Underground." Saeki's transmission echoed in her mind. *"The majority of Metal Float's energy demands are covered by energy resources on the ocean floor. Adjusting output fluctuations for that is the greatest load on the system. In order to keep the electric circuits as short as possible… Grace is there, underground. Please, she—"*

The transmission cut off, and there was an explosion. A tremor came from somewhere.

"Ah!"

Vivy planted her feet and hands below her and increased the output of the actuators in her elbows. The rubble on top of her moved incrementally. The load applied to her joints was at its maximum, and the heat caused smoke to rise from her body. It didn't matter. The joints just needed to last until she could get out from under the concrete on her back.

"Matsumoto." She sent a transmission as she worked to free herself. *"Can you hear me?"*

"In flight outdoors, same altitude!"

The short, backed-into-a-corner response wasn't the kind she normally got from him. She heard more explosions. Vivy figured he was in

combat with the drones. His capacity was dedicated entirely to calculating flight paths and evasive maneuvers.

Vivy continued to lift the concrete. Alerts popped up, chaotic calculations running through Vivy's circuits. Saeki, Grace, the shared past of an AI and a human. Their meeting. The old church.

Their vows.

That was the data Matsumoto had sent her on the original history. It was a distraction. She started from one end, archiving the data her mind automatically referenced. Partway through, Vivy stopped.

There were their vows.

I will come to you as quickly as I can.

"I will come for you," Vivy murmured without calculation.

There was a significant gap between the concrete and the floor. Vivy rose to her feet, holding the weight on her shoulders as she straightened her legs and back.

I will not push myself.

"I will make it so you don't have to push yourself anymore." Vivy shoved the concrete aside and stood straight. It fell, scattering rubble and dust.

Part of the wall was destroyed, and a brisk wind blew in from outside. Vivy could see Matsumoto flying out there ahead of her. She referenced the map data. There was a thin wall at the back of the control room. A duct containing a fuel pipe ran behind it, coming up from underground. The duct was quite wide all the way down to the underground levels, most likely to allow the massive AIs to enter.

"Matsumoto."

Vivy didn't wait for a response to the transmission she sent. She just ran.

I will protect you for my entire life.

"I will destroy you, Grace—so we can both protect our missions!" she shouted as she ran, not stopping as she kicked through the wall. Then she fell, bound for the underground space several kilometers below.

. : 10 : .

VIVY FELL SO FAST, her vision blurred. It was a straight shot, and lights occasionally streaked past her along the way, providing some sort of signal. Platforms jutted out near the lights, probably for maintenance.

Flipping over, Vivy assumed a skydiving position. Calculations ran rapidly through her mind. In this position, she could achieve a balance with the air resistance that would prevent her from speeding up, making her terminal velocity approximately 200 kilometers per hour. She was falling more than 50 meters per second, fast enough that she would likely hit her head on any protruding platform the moment she processed it was there, considering the limitations to her field of vision.

She didn't care what happened to her body, but her head was the core where all her calculations took place. She needed to protect her positronic brain no matter what.

This was the first time Vivy had experienced a long freefall. She rapidly reran her calculations and maintained her positioning. Below her, thick bulwarks began to close one after another, like eyelids sliding shut. She'd been detected.

Vivy immediately whirled headfirst for better visibility and to increase her terminal velocity to over 300 kilometers per hour, allowing her to slip through several of the closing shields. Even with her boost in speed, she wouldn't make it through all of them. Upon reaching this conclusion, she sent a transmission. *"Matsumoto!"*

His reply came not in words but in the roar of heavy-ion thrusters. Matsumoto was plummeting, just like Vivy, accelerating as he snatched her from the air. They passed through a closing bulwark, and Matsumoto started to close his shell around her, but there was the grating sound of something catching and the shell stopped.

A maintenance AI was clinging to Matsumoto.

They were falling too fast for Vivy to speak out loud. *"Where did it—?!"* She kicked at the AI with a spiteful, transmitted shout. There was a dull *thud*, and its manipulators released. Then another maintenance AI attached itself.

"They're coming from in there!" Matsumoto said.

Vivy's vision was so blurry that she couldn't see the signal lights, but Matsumoto had. She managed to hold on to him as she tried to peel away the AI attached to his rear—the section currently pointing upward. Just then, a shadow flitted through the dark air. The air split with a loud *crack* as they plummeted, and an odd noise mixed with the sound of Matsumoto's engine.

Drones.

Vivy made an immediate decision. *"Don't worry about closing the shell, just go faster!"*

"That's crazy!"

"It's fine, just—!"

The maintenance AI's eyes glowed. The sound of the drones drew closer, and the bulwarks slid further closed.

Everything happened as Grace willed it. These AIs were extensions of her body aimed at eliminating threats. Grace had taken up her new mission more than four and a half years ago. Vivy had taken up *her* mission less than a month ago, if measured from her perspective as opposed to Diva's. Grace might have been Vivy's younger sister, but she was more experienced with her mission. And she was somewhere several kilometers underground, far ahead of Vivy.

And so…

"Fasteeeeer!"

I'm not going to catch her going so slow!

Suddenly, the blue trail behind the heavy-ion thrusters burst. Any drones caught in the electrical charge running through the air lost control. They crashed into the walls and shattered. Even the drones that escaped the electrical charge fell behind. Matsumoto swerved back and forth, evading the pipes jutting out toward the center.

Vivy's awareness couldn't keep up with the speed, and one of her arms slammed into a pipe. Unable to handle the force of impact, the arm shattered into a thousand pieces.

Another maintenance AI clinging to Matsumoto was whisked away by the air whooshing around them.

"I see it!" Matsumoto said at last.

Deep in a hole below was a collection of top-tier AI technology. Countless terminals were mounted on the walls, so many blinking lights that it hurt to look at. The familiar lights told her that the terminals were being accessed.

That was all at the end of the open space. When he realized that, Matsumoto braked hard. The sudden g-force sent Vivy's internal lubricant surging into her feet, causing alarms to sound in her mind.

"Ack, the walls! Don't stop!"

The last bulwark was closing just below them. Knowing they wouldn't make it in time, Vivy leapt from Matsumoto.

In that moment, the Sisters' eyes met.

Grace's entire body—save for her face—was covered in abnormally large cables. They connected her to the terminals along the walls. Her extremities were being cooled. There were even pipes circulating liquid nitrogen, likely to allow her to endure the increased heat from the high load of calculations; they coursed through the area like malformed blood vessels.

"Grace…" Vivy pulled back her remaining arm as she fell. "Grace!"

The neck was where the circuits connecting to the positronic brain were concentrated. Vivy jammed her fist dead center in Grace's neck. As she did, her eye cameras watched Grace's expression.

She had continued to fulfill her mission, but she wasn't smiling. Nor did she look sad, unlike Vivy, who gazed upon her.

Grace had no last words. Her mission simply came to an end.

. : 11 : .

A FEW WEEKS after the event, the public concluded that Metal Float had self-destructed when its programming went wild. AI companies and organizations throughout the world—and their respective governments—buzzed like a kicked hornets' nest.

Saeki received a letter from a drone. Apparently, it was running a series of deliveries to a variety of places and demanded an absurdly high credit payment from him. There wasn't anything written on the paper; it merely enclosed an item the size of hard candy. He knew the object at first glance. It was what he and Grace had agreed to exchange with a piece from his pacemaker someday, although they hadn't been able to follow through.

It was a piece of the heart belonging to the woman he had loved more than anything in the world.

Chapter 5:
The Songstress in the Songstress

. : 1 : .

AND NOW, your warm home awaits!

And now, we welcome you back!

The audience longed for home as the song's intro washed gently over them. It was the headlining show of the day. The song played out a story, sort of like a musical. The immersive background was pastoral, displaying a countryside that could have been in the western land of liberty more than two centuries ago.

Wood and brick houses dotted the landscape, and a soft breeze sent waves rippling through the golden wheat fields. A farmer's daughter—the youngest child and a bit of a tomboy—begged her parents for a pair of chestnut horses. A great flock of sheep—her grandparents' pride and joy—wandered the pasture. The timid, eldest child was kind, the total opposite of his sister. He put his heart into looking after the sheep, with sheepdogs at his heels. And then there was a fully grown cherry tree, planted by the family and beloved by them all.

Holograms of the characters and scenes surrounded the stage, the audience, and beyond. Additionally, the holograms captured the smells and feels of the scenery. A breeze carrying the rich scent of earth caressed the cheeks of the elderly in the audience, a foreign smell even to their generation due to the land's development. The sheepdogs trotted through the crowds, gently licking the hands of the children who reached out in curiosity.

Amid it all, only one form remained motionless.

In the middle of the stage, beside the cherry tree, a scarecrow overlooked the wheat fields. It wore a hemp jacket and a straw hat pulled

low over its eyes. Neither its face nor its body were visible, and it didn't budge when a mischievous crow landed on its head.

The scene changed rapidly. Thousands of snowstorms and tens of thousands of rainstorms passed. The children were by their grandparents' sides as they went to heaven, then they grew into adults. The horses passed away, and a run-down car came to take their place. Exhaust fumes filled the air, and the night sky disappeared behind electric streetlamps. The children of the family, now with families of their own, moved with their elderly parents to the far-off city, where life was easy.

But the scarecrow still didn't move. Its jacket became torn, and bits of its straw hat hung off. The rotting cherry tree was chopped down, leaving only a stump behind. The family home was destroyed. New people came with heavy machinery.

When they were children, the elderly members of the audience might have seen some of the old cars from the displayed era, or the fridges, air conditioners, and other home apparatuses that were being moved around. Products with AI slowly joined the mix, and each of those things was discarded, tossed violently aside.

The scarecrow went from being the guardian of the wheat fields to being the overseer of a graveyard for spent machines. As time passed, the heap of abandoned products grew. And, at some point, a day dawned where people had stopped abandoning things, and the place itself had faded from their memories.

At the scarecrow's feet lay a pile of cables and circuit boards. A single tree sprout poked out from within, filled with a creeping strength that resisted everything in the world. The bud had emerged from the stump—it was a new cherry tree. The oil leaking from the surrounding machinery blackened and marred the sprout, but it persevered, grew, made its existence known.

Finally, the scarecrow moved. Its legs, thrust into the ground, bent, and it crouched down. Its arms, poking straight out of its jacket, reached down and stroked the young cherry tree.

The musical intro that quietly began reminded the scarecrow of its original role. The scarecrow yanked its feet from the ground and placed its hands on the machines at its sides. Instantly, the rusty red devices

transformed into reproductions of the two chestnut horses that used to run through those fields.

As the scarecrow slowly walked along, it reached out and touched one decrepit machine after another. Change after change took place in the field, and soon the flock of sheep, the sheepdogs, and even the family home were born anew.

This new scene had none of the pastoral quality of the original. Pipes, circuit boards, and cogs unsuited to the era poked out everywhere. The horribly tarnished building had none of the warmth of woodwork. Nothing was more disconcerting than the mechanical animals, whose gaping frames left their metallic internal organs entirely visible.

Yet the scarecrow didn't stop moving. As the fake lives began their days, centered on the young cherry tree, a rhythm was added to the song that spurred the intro on. The mechanical animals were clicking their feet, and in response, the scarecrow leapt into the air. It reached out to the animals, one after another, and they awoke.

The accompanying music brimmed with joy as the scarecrow tore off its jacket and straw hat. Beneath the clothes was a humanoid machine:

Diva.

The cherry tree continued to grow. Diva smiled as its growth and the song's tempo sped up, and then she sang.

And now…

. : 2 : .

"THANK YOU for your kind attention." Diva bowed low to the audience while saying the closing phrase that hadn't changed a bit since she first stepped onstage.

Along with the warm applause from the audience, Diva's audio sensors picked up the voice of a small child asking, "Where's the horsies?" The AI songstress's lips tugged up in a faint smile.

The mechanical animals that had been onstage until just a moment ago had vanished with the rest of the holograms.

Diva lifted her head. She accurately gathered data on the audience in less than a second. The concert hall was at 71 percent capacity. Twenty-two more seats were occupied than on the same day last week—a decent crowd, considering it was a weekday. Even so, the group seemed a bit thin. Returning audience members made up over 80 percent of the people there, which meant there was quite a lot of the regular crowd in attendance and only a few newcomers. The only data point that had no negative counter to it when Diva judged the performance was the fact that there were a lot of parents with children, meaning she was drawing in viewers.

In the past, Diva had performed every night, and you couldn't get the prime seats in the front row unless you won an auction. Now she only performed twice a week: once on a weekday and once on the weekend. She'd performed every day for four years from the first day she took to the stage, after which she only got one day off weekly. After that, her number of weekly performances gradually reduced to keep the concert hall full. It was just last year that her schedule was changed to only two performances a week.

Diva maintained the perfectly calculated smile on her face as she walked off stage. Just before she disappeared, she turned back to the audience and gave one more graceful bow. She listened to the echo of grateful applause and stepped backstage.

AIs ran every operation back here, and the majority of the equipment was for creating holograms. Most of the sound and lighting equipment was on the audience side of the stage. She passed by the equipment, went through the door marked Employees Only, and moved toward a room that the employees called the Dressing Room. It was Diva's personal standby area.

As she walked down the hall, roaring cheers wiped out the remaining sounds of the applause. Diva glanced at the various monitors installed along the hallway. They broadcasted images of each of twenty-some stages in NiaLand, ranging from tiny to gargantuan. Diva had just been on Stage 1—unofficially called the Main Stage—and that monitor showed the audience

still clapping away. Several members of the crowd had been surprised by the other cheers, however, and looked around for the source.

The excitement was coming from Stage 2, often called the Substage. According to the schedule, the performance on Stage 2 had started just after Diva's finished. While it was rare for this era, the performers weren't using holograms. They instead had real pyrotechnics showering a fountain of sparks and smoke. The audio was unedited raw sound backing the human band members' performances.

At the center of the stage, getting showered with cheers, was an idol group. All four members of the band were high school girls…and they were all human.

***

"That's not what you promised!"

"I didn't promise anything. All I said was I'd consider it."

"You're nitpicking. I checked with our manager. Our performance today brought in more viewers than Diva-san's did! You promised we'd be on the Main Stage—"

"I *said* I'd consider it. How many times did I tell you I couldn't promise anything?"

Diva had been about to knock on the door to the staff room for the entertainment department but stopped when she heard the voices coming from the other side. She automatically referenced the data storage built into her body to determine the owners of the voices. The one trying to placate the other was the head of live performances, whom Diva had worked with for twenty years. He was a veteran, and the others often called him "the Director."

The one chewing out the Director was…

"…"

Despite her hesitation, Diva knocked anyway. She announced her presence through the door, and the Director replied, "It's open!"

Responding to his voice, the automatic door unlocked—it had, in fact, been locked—and opened up.

"Good job today," the girl in the room muttered, sounding disgusted.

Her full name was Tokura Haru. She was about a handspan taller than the average girl and still clad in her flashy stage outfit. Haru was beautiful, with sculpted, slightly masculine features. Her black hair spilled down her back, nearly as long as Diva's. The high school student went by her first name as her stage name—Haru—and she was the leader of the idol group Season.5.

"You too," replied Diva, and Haru gave her a somewhat sarcastic bow.

Raising her head, Haru immediately whirled back on the Director. "Well, then, you'd better actually consider it. I became an idol so I could stand on that stage." She excused herself with another bow and left the room.

Right when the automatic door closed behind her, the Director let out a sigh. He made no attempt to hide his frustration. "You don't come here that often, Diva. Is there trouble of some sort?"

"No, there's no trouble. I wanted to ask you something…" Diva tried to continue speaking, but her communication circuit cut in and stopped her. She decided the Director was too tired. "It's not an urgent issue, though," she added in an act that a human would call considerate. "It can wait until you're not so tired."

"Nah, it's fine. I *am* tired, but talking to you usually makes me feel better. Come on, take a seat." The Director smiled and gestured to a chair. She thanked him and sat down. "Your performance today was perfect. I'd score it a full 100!"

"Thank you, but that's actually what I wanted to ask you about."

The Director tilted his head questioningly.

"Should I change? Like Haru and the other girls."

"Change?"

"Haru-san mentioned something about it earlier—about the number of people I'm getting into the seats."

“Oh, that… You heard that, huh?” He smiled weakly and scratched his head, unsure what to say.

For some time now, gossip held that Diva’s ability to attract a full house was weakening year after year. People said things like, “She has no staying power because she never changes.”

As an AI, Diva was designed and manufactured to be produce a voice that humans statistically would perceive as ideal. She received the occasional upgrade to adjust for particular audiences or musical numbers, but her singing voice was nearly identical as it had been when she was designed. That didn’t just go for her voice but her body as well. Her internal circuits were swapped out again and again, but her outer appearance hadn’t changed at all. No matter how much time passed, she would always be the beautiful songstress.

People had expressed doubts about Diva since her creation, but the voices had grown louder and more commonplace in the last few years. The loudest of the lot were younger music fans of all genders, as well as ardent supporters of idols. These fans claimed idols had context—that they had a *story*. You didn’t just watch a single live performance to see and hear them once in your life. You watched their entire growth. Idol fans witnessed the emotions their favorite groups had when they first started out, the tiny venues full of empty seats, the idols’ mistakes at live performances, their private struggles, and the success of overcoming it all… Fans kept watching and supporting them through thick and thin, and idols gave them everything in return.

Ultimately, what the fans really wanted from idols was a varied environment and performance, for better or worse. Put simply, it was all about change.

Diva had never once referred to herself as an idol. She was a singer, an AI made to be a songstress. However, she was marketed and initially fawned over like an idol, so plenty of people saw her as the first idol AI. Yet Diva didn’t change. The songs she sang and her live performances might have evolved, but she herself did not. She *could* not.

“Yeah, I guess idols have always been valued because they persevere,” the Director admitted. “It’s not like Haru and the other girls are

all that good at singing, but they give it their best, and that draws in the audience. But, Diva, that's only because they're human."

"That is…probably true."

"But you're *good*, and that won't change. There's nothing to worry about. Not sure how that sounds coming from me, though. You've got plenty of years on me." He smiled, and Diva smiled back.

Diva had been at NiaLand for over fifty years. At this point, the number of humans with more experience than her could be counted on one hand. She'd known the Director from the time he'd first started at NiaLand, back when he used to get bossed around by the former head of performances.

"Do Haru-san and her group want to perform on the Main Stage?" asked Diva.

"Yep. Well, it might be less 'her and her group' and more just 'her.' Some of the staff *have* been saying they should be on the Main Stage, since they're so popular…"

"With the current schedule, there's an open slot at the beginning of the week when I'm not performing."

"I guess there is. You okay with that?"

It was an unexpected question, and Diva's circuits chugged away. "I'm not the one responsible for that decision. If there's an audience who wants to see them…"

"That actually makes me a little sad." The Director's expression turned serious. "No human performers have stepped on our Main Stage since your debut performance. Even now, we have AI mascots and holograms putting on shows on your days off. Personally, I want to protect the pride that comes with that record."

"Pride…?"

"I guess it's like…we've built a world where non-humans provide entertainment. That kind of thing has become normal in modern times, but a long time ago… Well, when you first took the stage, obviously you had your voice, but people were surprised by who you were. They were moved; they had expectations. Expectations that you AIs could show us something

we aren't capable of. That's how I felt when I was a kid. I want our current audiences to feel the same thing."

Once their conversation was over, Diva didn't go back to her room. Instead, she went to the Main Stage. The event hall was dark, lit solely by the emergency lighting. It was already past the park's closing time, so there were no sign of any employees, let alone any audience members.

In the 71 years since the building was constructed, 336 different acts had taken the stage. The building boasted a max capacity of 1,099 and a total of over 20 million people had sat in those seats over the years. Diva had performed on that stage thousands of times.

"Navi," she said.

A voice responded to Diva from the terminal backstage that controlled the hologram equipment. "Whaaat? What do you want at this time of night? I was sleeping." It was a woman's voice, and it sounded annoyed.

Diva ignored the sting in the voice and said, "Display six months of data from the eighth edition of the magazine on file."

"Guess you can't even say sorry for waking me up."

Several windows popped up in front of Diva's eyes.

Navi was an AI without a body. She was built into the programming of every AI in NiaLand without its own personality, and only NiaLand staff had access to her. Most of her programming was done in a top-down approach that simply implemented the orders given to her by staff members. On the other hand, her communication circuit was programmed using a bottom-up machine learning process to facilitate smooth communication when there were orders flung about that contained lots of performance terminology. This produced her unique tone and personality.

Diva scrolled through the windows. They belonged to an idol magazine put out by a leading publishing company. Actual paper magazines had disappeared during the past few decades, so while they were still called "magazines," they were really just collections of images and video data. Diva tapped on an issue that had Haru and the others of Season.5 on the cover. It featured a special on them.

Words danced in the window: *"Real idols! Real performances!"*

Season.5 came together as a group under the concept that they could be like idols of the past. A keyword related to them was "handmade." Their costumes, their music, their performances were all made by humans. Saying that made it clear they were the exact opposite of Diva and her shows, where everything was done by AIs.

In modern times, almost no companies or corporations in the idol industry put on an event without relying on at least *some* AI technology. Tours, for example, no longer involved extensive travel. The majority of performances were conducted using hologram technology to connect to regional venues when the idols performed. Most merchandise wasn't physical either—80 percent of goods came in the form of data, something that couldn't be held. It was standard to accept that physicality and distance were hindrances and to not go out in public.

But Season.5 decided those hindrances were, in fact, a selling point. They made real merchandise, went out on tour, and put on in-person performances. This method, so against the grain of modern times, seemed to be a constant struggle for them, but they gradually attracted fans for doing so.

Diva thought back to what the Director had said earlier. "Idols have always been valued because they persevere…"

Her mission was "to make her audience happy through her singing, for the sake of humanity." She wasn't an idol; she was a singer. Diva was also an AI, and the Director said she was fine as she was. If she became aware of elements of what it meant to be an idol and acted accordingly, would her songs reach more people? Would that help her fulfill her mission?

"Navi… Set the stage for 'Home Sweet Home,'" she said.

"Could you manage a 'please,' Diva?"

"…Please," muttered Diva, her heart not quite in it.

The stage lights turned on and the hologram machines activated, creating the fantastical scene: a farm from the distant past. This set belonged to "Home Sweet Home," the main piece for her weekday performances for the last twenty years. Diva stood stock-still amid the

scenery she'd looked at just a few hours earlier, calculations running through her circuits.

First, she referred to the definition of the verb "persevere" in her communication circuit.

Persevere

per·se·vere | \ ˌpər-sə-ˈvir \

to put in continual effort in pursuit of a goal despite any difficulties or time required.

to continue existing despite difficulties or changes.

EXAMPLE: She persevered through hardships in order to become a famous singer.

Between numbers one and two, the first definition was the one she'd be able to express onstage.

"To put in continual effort in pursuit of a goal…" she murmured. She determined that this would be difficult. AIs didn't have a concept of "effort," after all.

If she had to consider the word itself, to "persevere" might be akin to when an AI tackled several tasks simultaneously, putting stress on their various circuits, but still kept going and forced themselves to complete the tasks.

"Navi. Advance set to two minutes and forty-one seconds in."

"Shouldn't that be, 'O-Navi-sama'?"

"I'll kick you."

The scene instantly changed. The old farm disappeared, replaced with the machine landfill. Diva's clothes also changed to the ragged jacket and straw hat of the scarecrow.

At this point in the show, the scarecrow, played by Diva, would stretch out its hand and grant the machines it touched fleeting life. The intro

would begin playing once a certain number of the machines had been revitalized. Diva ran some calculations.

"Navi. Change the program. Recalculate so that the horses, sheep, and dogs will—that's it—so they go back to their original machines if I haven't touched them again within ten seconds."

"What are you planning? It's programmed so the intro won't start unless there's a certain number of animals…"

"That's the point," said Diva with a hint of pride. "I will show the stress of having to occasionally touch all the animals. This will allow me to perform 'perseverance.' Remove the changes once the intro begins."

"I don't really get it, but…sure?"

The program was altered. Diva quickly reached her hand out, bringing animals to life one after another. After a few seconds, the two horses were rushing around and neighing as programmed and collided with Diva.

"Gah!"

The program determined she'd been struck by an imaginary weight, so she fell backward onto her rear. The sheepdogs ahead of her crumpled back into broken machines. Ten seconds had passed. She reached out again, still on the ground, and something stepped on her hand and head. It was a sheep. She fell facedown as they stampeded over her.

"Ah ha ha ha!" Navi laughed out loud.

Sheep just kept stepping on Diva. She couldn't get up because of the irregular strikes to her body. Her hand on the ground continued to create more sheep. Perhaps the program had determined that the sheep stepping on her was the same as her touching them, since they only grew in number as time went by. The two horses and several sheepdogs had already disappeared.

The stage was filled with sheep, and the intro began.

"S-stop! Please, stop!" Diva cried out, unable to take it any longer. The animals all froze in place.

After a moment of silence, Diva stood. There wasn't a single speck of dust on the stage, but she still brushed off her clothing after standing as part of the routine.

"Hee hee hee…"

Diva could hear Navi's quiet snickering. "What's so funny?" she asked, perturbed.

"I mean… Ah ha ha!"

"Stop laughing!"

"What are you doing, Diva? Aren't you too old for this? You're, like, over sixty!"

"I'm persevering."

"Uh, sorry? You're *what*?"

"I'm…persevering."

After that, Diva adjusted the time it took for the animals to turn back to machines and tried again, but the results were the same. Navi burst out laughing every time.

"Delete all changes to the program so far. Display set at two minutes twenty seconds into the performance."

There was no point in looking so awkward that she was laughed at. She gave up trying to use the animals as a way to show effort, instead moving to center stage and changing the displayed time of the set. Her feet were embedded in the ground, she was unable to move; it was shortly before the scene where the animals started moving, when the scarecrow—who hadn't budged so far—pulled its legs out of the ground.

"Increase the imaginary weight of my clothing, as well as the imaginary lateral pressure the ground applies to my legs so I can't easily pull my legs out. Let's start with…numbers balanced to 80 percent of my leg actuators' output capacity."

"You're still at it?"

"Just do it already."

Navi heaved a frustrated sigh as Diva noticed an increased pressure on her legs. Her jacket and straw hat pressed down on her head and shoulders with weight they didn't seem capable of. Diva acknowledged the situation and went to tense her legs. Then her audio sensors picked up a dull snapping sound.

Diva determined that it came from above. She forced her head to tilt up against the imaginary weight of her straw hat, which felt now like a mass of metal on her head and saw a huge black form rushing toward her. She realized it was the hologram device that had been mounted above and tried to avoid it…but something stopped her from carrying out the task.

Her legs. Her feet couldn't move because of the imaginary pressure. It would hit her. The moment she determined the danger, she lost consciousness.

When she came to, a red light was flashing on-stage.

"Hm?"

All the lights in the concert hall were out. Navi's voice was coming from the hologram terminal backstage, repeating, "Hey, are you okay?" The world "ERROR" flashed in red in midair. The hologram displaying the machine landfill that had been there a moment before was now gone, revealing the expansive, flat stage in front of Diva.

"What happened…?" she muttered in shock, looking around. Her body had no scratches or abnormalities.

And there was the hologram device she had been certain would hit her. It lay on the ground several meters away, looking like it'd been struck by a massive metal hammer.

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"WELL, THAT'S NASTY," the doctor said with a smile, a cigarette pressed between her lips as she tapped furiously on a laser-projected keyboard.

Diva was with her in NiaLand's AI maintenance room. The room was predominately white, making it feel a bit like a consultation room in a hospital, but it had had none of the equipment for humans like an examination table or a heart monitor. There was a row of charging stations, capsule beds for determining errors, and even screwdrivers and pliers that looked out of place in this era. Other than the doctor's desk and terminal, it all looked more like a repair shop.

While the doctor was focused on her work, Diva sat in a chair, looking at the doctor's monitor. Cables from the ceiling connected to Diva's temples and back, huge volumes of data passing through them.

"Doctor… I thought there was no smoking in here," said Diva.

The doctor blew out smoke and said, "You'll break my heart, Diva. Don't be so uptight."

"Smoking is not permitted anywhere in the park. Please put it out right now."

"Do you even know how much a pack of paper cigarettes costs these days? Oh, this is nasty too. Look, I'm doing my job, aren't I?" The doctor continued to tap happily away at her keyboard, her cigarette still lit, and Diva sighed.

This doctor had been hired a few years back. She was in her early thirties and considered a genius of AI maintenance; she was just a bit obsessed with math and AIs. Despite being an AI herself, Diva found it hard to understand the doctor's ardent passion for the collection of programs making up AIs' internal circuits. A flirtatious sapphic woman, the doctor had a habit of breaking the no-smoking rule whenever one of her female AI assistants rejected her amorous advances.

Diva turned to an AI that resembled a young woman. "Nacchan-san." The AI helped with the maintenance work, and right now her body was directly connected to the terminal through cables.

"Yes, Diva?"

"Tell her again. There's no smoking allowed here."

Nacchan was the ridiculous official name the doctor had given her. The cutesy form stemmed from a particular pronunciation of the word

“nurse.” She grimaced.

“Nacchan, will you marry me if I quit?” the doctor asked.

“This is what it’s like…” said Nacchan, looking at Diva with eyes that sought understanding. Her expression was indistinguishable from a human’s.

“All right, then. You’ve waited long enough.” The doctor’s hands stopped and she spun her chair around to face Diva. She reached back and tapped the terminal, making a projected screen appear in the air. Picking up the screen between her fingers, she showed it to Diva.

“No abnormalities?” Diva asked, immediately processing the content on the screen.

“Nope. As always, your body is pure and beautiful.” The doctor exhaled a thin stream of smoke. “Power system, operating system, positronic brain system—none of them have got any abnormalities. Based on the information in your internal logs, you’ve been operating perfectly… at least for the past day or so.”

The hovering monitor switched to display a video of the Main Stage. The entire stage was within view, shown as it would be if seen from the seats. Diva stood in the center, dressed as the scarecrow. The ground of the hologram landfill surrounded her feet, fixing them in place.

Then came the snapping sound. Diva fought against the weight of her clothing to look up. The next moment, the hologram device fell. Diva’s right foot was pulled free from the ground. Using the force of her leg being released from the pressure on it, Diva swung her leg straight up. She kicked the hologram device directly in the center, sending it flying. It tumbled across the stage with a shriek of broken metal. The holograms immediately disappeared, and Navi could be heard repeating the words, “Hey, are you okay?”

The video stopped there.

“So, you really lost consciousness?” asked the doctor.

Diva nodded. “I did.”

“The logs don’t show that. They show that you pulled your leg out and kicked that thing with everything you had, seeing as it could have

meant your death if you took a direct hit to the head. This all happened with you conscious, of course."

"Right…" Diva wasn't surprised. She'd run three self-checks immediately after the incident, but none of them had detected any abnormalities either.

The doctor glanced at the other AI. "Nacchan, have you ever lost consciousness?"

"I have, but it was always caused by a freeze when I was unable to withstand some sort of stress. In those cases, both my positronic brain and my body stopped. The logs reflected this."

Diva had experienced that sort of thing several times since she'd been activated. In fact, all of them were caused by overload on her communication circuit. It hadn't happened recently, since she'd become able to hold a relatively natural conversation.

"I see. I'm sorry to have bothered you with this," said Diva. If there were no abnormalities, there was nothing maintenance could do. She detached the cables connected to her body and stood.

"Wait, wait. Sure that's enough for you?" asked the doctor.

"What do you mean, 'enough'?"

"I don't know what it is, but clearly something's bothering you, isn't it? That's what your systems say, anyway. You're making that composed face of yours!" The doctor cheerfully drove her point home, and Diva frowned.

The doctor must have seen some numbers that caught her attention during the debug. Not that Diva had any idea why they could be called "nasty," as the doctor had done twice.

Truthfully, something *was* bothering Diva. While she had avoided the danger of a deadly crash, her body had moved even though her consciousness cut out. And there was one other thing.

"Do humans…" Diva rapidly ran calculations, trying to find the right words. "Do humans ever experience something like this?"

"Well, I just blacked out three days ago 'cause I had too much to drink," said the doctor.

Diva felt that was different somehow but decided to interpret the loss of memory as the same. “What did you do after that happened?”

“Oh, are you taking an interest in me now?”

“It’s less interest in you, and more in humans in general.”

“Ouch, okay. Hmph. That’s what’s bothering you, huh?” The doctor gave an amused smile. “I didn’t really do anything. Humans have ‘compartmentalization’ and ‘screw it’ functions. There was nothing wrong with my body, so I put the incident out of my mind, said ‘screw it,’ and didn’t do anything. Well, it did look like I fell over, ’cause my knees were scraped up.”

“Screw it…?” Diva parroted. That was a difficult concept for an AI to grasp.

“I’m going to give you a piece of advice, Diva,” the doctor went on. “The reason I drank too much and started smoking again three days ago was because Nacchan rejected my marriage proposal for the fourth time, and—”

“The *eighth* time. Please don’t halve the amount,” Nacchan corrected her.

“And she says the exact same thing every time.” The doctor held up her hand, palm up, urging Nacchan to go on.

“I refuse. It is unrelated to my mission.” The AI’s response sounded almost rehearsed.

The doctor let out a little sigh even though she was the one who’d asked Nacchan to say it. “See? It’s cruel, isn’t it?”

“And your point is…?” asked Diva, uncomprehending.

“Your body abnormalities are one thing, but if you’re bothered by something, go back to your roots. That’s where your origin is.”

An AI’s origin. That was their mission.

“I know that much already…” Diva muttered.

“Doctor, I’ve told you several times. Human-AI marriage isn’t recommended as there are only a scant few examples,” Nacchan states coolly.

“I know, I know!” The doctor suddenly collapsed on her desk. “But I love you!”

Nacchan looked at the petulant doctor and let her throw her tantrum like she was used to this. Diva observed the exchange in silence, a wry smile on her face. Just then, a calculation flitted across her circuits. She carefully examined it until the doctor’s tantrum came to an end.

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It was past midnight by the time Diva returned to her room—her standby location for the past several decades. The interior decorations hadn’t changed much. The main difference was that, while she once had so many gifts from fans that they piled high and filled her room on a daily basis, she now only received enough from her twice-weekly performances to put on a small chest of drawers.

There were the lights and the mirror with its built-in hologram device, both of which suited the room’s feel. Their internal circuits and AIs had gone through rapid upgrades over the years, but their exteriors looked exactly the same as always. All of it was to present the room of the beautiful unchanging songstress.

Guests sometimes took a behind-the-scenes tour—once every six months or so these days—but they rarely marveled anymore. Nowadays, they smiled and said, “It hasn’t changed a bit.”

Is it really okay that I don’t change? The question popped into Diva’s circuits, but she shook her head to banish it.

“That can wait,” she murmured, forcing it down to a lower priority. AIs could easily do the “compartmentalization” the doctor spoke of.

Diva drew the cable from the earring on her right ear and connected it to the terminal built into the mirror with one fluid motion. The world faded away, then built itself back up. Now, she was in a music room lit by the setting sun—her Archive.

She could connect wirelessly to The Archive, but a wired connection meant less stress from all the necessary calculations. Diva’s avatar stood in

front of a nearby music stand as she referred back to what happened in the maintenance room not long ago.

There were no abnormalities with her body, nothing recorded in her logs. A human would say she was unconscious while her body moved of its own accord without leaving any logs. This malfunction shouldn't have been possible, considering how AIs were built. But Diva had noticed something similar to that improbable malfunction hiding in a corner of her own data as she watched the doctor slump onto her desk in the maintenance room.

She touched the sheet music on the stand and accessed it. A window popped up showing data from a couple of decades ago. It displayed images of a certain reception hall. Among all the researchers gathered in the space, there was a single AI on whom Diva's attention had been focused.

"Grace…" A hint of sentimentality leaked into Diva's voice.

Grace was Diva's little sister. The words Diva had said to Grace at that place and time had been the first and last she'd ever told her. Grace had become the control AI for the island Metal Float. For reasons unknown, Metal Float went wild, killing many people and leaving a huge dent in the economy.

One researcher had stood beside Grace at the reception—Saeki Tatsuya. While the world called for her to shoulder the responsibility for Metal Float's rampage after her demise, that researcher had fought to protect Grace's and the Sisters' honor.

Saeki was a world leader in the field of AI research, and the things he'd said about Grace were normally used to describe other humans. He gave Diva the impression that both his research successes and his attitude toward Grace at the time had been due to the fact that he saw AIs in a friendly light. Something about the regard Diva's doctor had for AIs seemed similar to Saeki's.

The first thought that had passed through Diva's circuits before was of Saeki and the memories of Grace that accompanied him.

Metal Float had been dismantled after the out-of-control incident, but it had produced huge advances in AI technology during its time. AI technology had been making steady progress over the past couple of

decades, but—just like an umbrella for the rain—some AI technologies hadn't changed much.

Data storage was the most obvious example. Storage capacity had increased throughout the years, but there had been no drastic breakthroughs since liquid storage. In the end, storage capacity depended on physical limitations. If a storage device was physically larger, it could hold more data, but bigger storage meant sacrifices in ease of operation. Security cameras from more than a century ago could save no more than a few days' worth of video data because their storage capacity was so low. Hence, they "forgot" things like humans did when the data was overwritten.

Modern AIs had the same problem. For instance, Diva could refer to anything she'd viewed with her eye cameras in the past week as if it was fresh and new, but anything older than that was compressed before it was stored in The Archive and removed from Diva's storage. What remained in Diva were light versions of memories, something akin to a headline or a table of contents. These functioned like a human's memory when some random stimulus triggered a recollection from the past.

The doctor triggered Diva's memories of Saeki, which gave way to thoughts of Grace, then moved on to the Metal Float incident. Diva dove into her logs which had been automatically stored in The Archive decades ago.

"I knew it…" she murmured, finding the spot she was looking for.

Just before the Metal Float incident, there were a couple of days where Diva's consciousness hadn't been calculated in logs. It was a period of approximately sixty hours. She accessed the details, referring to The Archive for what happened at the time…and "remembered."

Back then, it hadn't resulted in a system error. While Diva had been sleeping in standby mode, OGC sent an access request from with a transmission stating they wished to conduct an immediate update and maintenance on Diva's internal circuits. NiaLand had approved. OGC AIs came to collect Diva, then she was returned to NiaLand sixty hours later.

However, that was just what was recorded in the logs surrounding Diva at the time. There wasn't a single memory of it from Diva's point of view, which was why Diva had been so surprised all those decades ago. The moment she had awoken, newscasters around the world spoke of nothing

but Metal Float going wild. NiaLand staff told Diva she'd been temporarily taken by OGC while she'd been in standby, and Diva had accepted that explanation. After all, the logs around her supported that story.

Spurred on by her findings, Diva searched for similar incidents. The pages of sheet music on the music stand flipped violently as if blown by a strong wind. She quickly got a hit. Diva had been manufactured over sixty years ago. That was more than five hundred thousand hours of operation. Out of that time, there were several instances where Diva could be considered to have lost consciousness.

Once, fifty-seven years ago.

Once, forty-two years ago.

Once, thirty-seven years ago.

And once, just a few hours ago, for a total of four times.

Diva was in the middle of pulling up data around each of those points in time when she noticed something. "Hm?"

Apart from the ten or so seconds of lost time that occurred a few hours ago, an event that shook the world occurred before or after each time she lost consciousness. Fifty-seven years ago, Toak attempted to assassinate Assemblyman Aikawa Youichi, the man who went on to become the lead legislator on the AI Naming Law. Forty-two years ago, the space hotel Sunrise fell into the Earth's atmosphere in an event commonly referred to as the Sun-Crash Incident. Thirty-seven years ago, without any known cause, Metal Float went berserk.

"This…"

Videos of the incidents played in sequence as Diva watched the overviews. Each incident was connected to AIs. Two of them were connected to the Sisters—specifically Diva's younger sister AIs. There were no victims in the Sun-Crash Incident because the two Sisters, Estella and Elizabeth, had prevented such an outcome.

"This has to be coincidence…right?"

Even at this exact moment in time, various significant events were unfolding around the world. But all of these particular incidents were related to AIs, and they all happened just before or after Diva lost

consciousness. Seeing this slight alignment made Diva stop her calculation that it was nothing more than coincidence.

To put it in human terms, something was bothering her about the situation.

“When there’s a big incident, The Archive’s bandwidth gets choked by demand from the media, average people, the AIs that accompany them, and any AIs directly connected to the incident, but…”

Diva immediately tossed aside the calculation results determining it could be a freeze caused by feedback from the overloaded Archive. If that had been the case, she would expect to see many other AIs who had lost consciousness, not just herself. On top of that, the past few decades had seen many conflicts and national incidents that had choked The Archive’s bandwidth even more than those major events.

Besides, when she was standing on the stage a few hours ago and the hologram device came falling toward her, there definitely hadn’t been any major incidents going on. And she hadn’t just lost consciousness—her body had moved on its own. That meant she was just overthinking things. She returned information on the incidents back to its original locations.

“There’s probably a new virus or something in my body that my logs and maintenance can’t pick up, and that caused a bug…”

Of all the possibilities, this was the most likely—and it must have had happened four separate times over the decades, unrelated to what was happening in the world.

Diva disconnected from The Archive, returning to her bedroom. She unplugged her cable from the mirror and reeled it back into her earring. Then she held her hand up to the mirror in front of her, fingers spread as if to show her palm. Starting with her pinky, she folded each of her fingers down in order to make a fist. Then she opened them back up, starting with her thumb. There was no disturbance in her consciousness or motion circuits.

Everything functioned as calculated.

She’d had four malfunctions over the decades. That, in and of itself, was an impressive number. Diva would likely be considered an excellent piece of equipment rather than defective. But that would only be true if she

herself was aware she malfunctioned as a result of her own calculations. There was no one more difficult to deal with than someone who didn't think they'd done anything wrong. This was true for both humans and AIs.

"In the end, is the doctor's advice correct?"

Diva was worried about the number of people coming to her shows. In order to resolve that, she was investigating how to act like a human. She fretted about her static, unchanging nature. Perhaps she needed to compartmentalize that, set it aside, and look back on her roots—at her mission.

Bugs were an AI's greatest enemy, the thing that could most get in the way. She could not allow herself to lose consciousness while she was singing in front of an audience. It didn't matter whether she was acting like a human or imitating idols; failure was not allowed. Diva's mission came before all else.

"You're inside me, aren't you?" Diva said into the mirror.

There was no reply.

She took a pen and a card from the chest of drawers. It was really an autograph card for those fans who wanted a physical autograph rather than a digital one. Diva wrote a few words on it: *What are you doing?*

She placed it on top of the chest of drawers, with the pen right beside it. And then she went to sleep, into standby mode.

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The moment Diva activated the next day, she picked the card up from the chest of drawers.

What are you doing?

As expected, there was no reply. It didn't look like the pen had moved either. It was right where Diva had left it last night.

"Agh…"

Diva resisted the urge to squeeze the hand gripping the card. She turned to face the mirror, like she had last night, and brought a hand to her

chest. Then she declared, “I will not let you get in my way. I will get you out of me soon.”

. : 4 : .

DIVA SPENT THE ENTIRE DAY conducting another thorough self-check. On a regular day off, Diva would get onstage and put on her normal performance to an audience of just a few staff members, so as not to neglect her motion circuits. Today, however, she couldn't use the Main Stage; they were removing and replacing the hologram device that had fallen.

During her check, she went through all the time she spent connected to The Archive and inspected every little bit of her massive amounts of code. But, just as the doctor had said, all she found was incredibly clean code, not one buggy byte among them.

Considering all possible options, Diva suspected an ongoing hack. If someone was actively hacking her from the outside, they might be able to hide the bug during her self-checks and maintenance. She got permission to use the Offline Room, which was a room completely cut off from all transmitted signals, preventing any access to what was inside. Even there, the results of her check were the same.

The Director called for Diva the evening of the next day.

"So…degradation from old age caused the break?" Diva said, and the Director nodded.

"Yeah. Normally, this would be a big enough issue that we'd notify the manufacturer, and all similar models would be removed from the market. Thankfully, we just barely avoided anyone getting hurt. And, well…I guess, there's not really anywhere else that puts the equipment through its paces quite like we do. We're thinking of internally chalking it up to 'insufficient inspections,' as long as you're okay with that being the official reason, since you're the one who actually stands on that stage. Obviously, the presumption is it will never happen again."

Diva said it was fine and gave a wry smile as the Director asked for her approval. While it was technically incorrect to say they had avoided "anyone getting hurt" as opposed to "anything getting damaged," Diva appreciated the Director's care in his choice of words. She also agreed that the hologram device had been put through its paces.

He'd called her out to the wings of the Main Stage. The hologram device that had fallen two days ago was now in a corner, out of the way. Looking closely, she saw the bolts that had fastened it in place had snapped in the middle. According to the technical staff, it was caused by the heat the device put out when in operation, combined with the cold of the cooling device meant to mitigate the heat. In other words, it had been subjected to extreme changes between hot and cold for a long time and finally reached its breaking point.

The hologram device could essentially be called an antique, since it had been installed thirty-five years ago and contained AI technology developed on Metal Float, which stopped operating thirty-seven years ago. It did undergo appropriate maintenance, but it was safe to say it was one of the oldest pieces of stage equipment in NiaLand.

"Just in case, we've checked over all the other hologram devices and changed out the bolts," the Director added.

"Will it be finished in time for tomorrow's performance?"

The device had fallen after her weekday performance. Her weekend performance was scheduled for tomorrow.

"That's why we're putting a rush on it," the Director said with a triumphant smile. "Might be inappropriate to say this, since we just avoided what could've been a huge incident, but…it's kind of the silver lining. We'll manage to get by without canceling your performance, and those have been going strong for sixty years."

Diva smiled back. Throughout her entire sixty years of performing, they hadn't canceled a single one of her shows. There were just a few times they had to stop the show when an audience member collapsed and had to be sent to the hospital in an ambulance.

"So, are you up for a rehearsal? No changes to the set list."

"Of course. Let's do it." Diva nodded and circled around to the back of the stage.

After a few moments, the lights dimmed and darkness enveloped her. The faint sound of the repaired hologram device switching from standby to active could be heard in the silence. The Director and other staff members shuffled around quietly in their seats.

Rehearsal or the real deal—it didn't matter to Diva. The tension ramped up as she felt the need to give the best performance possible. Backstage was its own world, in its own time. Diva waited for the moment Navi activated the hologram and the lights and music that came with it.

"…"

A different calculation crossed Diva's circuits as the Director's words floated to mind: *"We just avoided what could've been a huge incident…"*

There already *had* been a huge incident. Some program of an unknown nature was likely inside her body. What if she lost consciousness during a real performance? That thought was enough to make Diva freeze. She had worked to fulfill her role since the moment she was created. Everything she'd done would be destroyed—and by her own body, no less.

By the time she realized she'd made a mistake, it was already too late. "Oh!"

A blinding spotlight turned on, and holographic smoke filled the stage. Normally, she would have been standing in her scripted location by now, giving the audience a glimpse of her silhouette. She dashed out, making it to the stage a few beats too late. It was an *unacceptable* mistake. She could tell through the smoke that the Director was frowning in his seat.

The opening music began to play, and Diva danced along with it—a dance that took advantage of her silhouette in the smoke. She forced herself to catch up on the timing. The intro portion finished, and the smoke instantly disappeared. Only holographic smoke could facilitate such a rapid transition.

Diva opened her mouth to sing, but a calculation slipped through her circuits like poison.

What happens if there is a bug and I lose consciousness again?

A few seconds later, the music stopped, with Diva standing stock-still. Her visual sensors observed all the members of staff in the seats staring in shock. Silence reigned supreme.

"Diva…? What's wrong?"

She could see the Director rising from his seat, a look of disbelief on his face. She couldn't reply…and she couldn't sing.

“How long are you going to stay like that?” came Navi’s voice from the control terminal.

The Director and the other staff members left the concert hall. The sun set, and it approached the park’s closing time. The stage went dark, the lights turned off. Still Diva stood there, unmoving, not even responding to Navi.

This was the first time since she’d been created that she had failed to sing on-stage. It didn’t matter that it had been just a rehearsal; the staff was utterly appalled. Later, she told them it was likely an “internal circuit error.” Her communication circuit calculated it would be best to smile, so as not to worry them, but she couldn’t implement the smile, so she explained the occurrence with a blank expression. They looked at her in disbelief. Of course they would. It was the first time any of them had seen a Diva who couldn’t sing.

After a while, one of the staff members asked what they would do about the next day’s performance. They all looked at her, waiting. Diva asked for some time, just overnight. Tomorrow’s performance began at 7:00 p.m. It was currently just past 10:00 p.m. Time was already cutting into her remaining twenty-four hours.

“…”

Diva cut off the calculations that had been running nonstop and faced the back of the stage.

“What’s this about?” someone asked as the lights suddenly turned on. “The Director told me what happened. So what’s the deal? You can’t sing?”

It was Haru. She was in her normal clothes, not her costume. The girl must have come without taking the time to wash off her makeup; her almond-shaped eyes were more exaggerated than usual.

Diva decided to offer a congratulatory greeting. “Good job on your performance. I could hear the cheers from here.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Haru said, brushing it aside. “What happened?” There was an edge to her voice that seemed almost hostile.

By contrast, Diva tried to keep her voice gentle. “My internal circuits prevented me from singing at today’s rehearsal.”

“Are you…serious?” Diva nodded, and Haru grimaced. “What’s happening with your performance tomorrow?”

“At this point, I don’t know.”

“…”

Haru hung her head. Diva waited, but neither one said anything for a time.

Diva was about to leave, assuming their conversation was over, but then Haru spoke up. “If you can’t sing, then step down. We’ll take over the Main Stage.”

“…I’m not the one who makes that decision.”

“What are you going to do if you can’t sing at the real performance? Diva-san, you’ve held the Main Stage for so long, but that would be a stain on its history. Are you saying you don’t care what happens?”

“As long as I can sing, I don’t care where I perform.”

Haru scowled and stepped closer to Diva. “You don’t *care*?!” Her tone was harsh. “Do you know what I’ve felt on the road to coming this far? What I feel as I work to make it to this stage?!”

Diva saw tears in her eyes. She ran a calculation, then lowered her head. “I’m sorry. It seems I’ve said the wrong thing.”

“I don’t want your apology!” Haru glared daggers at Diva. She looked on the cusp of saying more, then muttered, “I have to go.” With that, she hurried off.

The unhealthy and persistent silence that you only hear after an argument hung over the stage.

“Wowie. Do you think maybe…*she* made the hologram device fall? You know, pulled a *Phantom of the Opera* so she can take the Main Stage?” Navi asked in a casual tone.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Diva gave the device Navi spoke from a swift kick and stared in the direction Haru had gone.

Diva updated her personal data on Haru to include a note that she was a stubborn person. Based on the statistics in her communication circuit, Diva determined that Haru was so stubborn, there was a high probability of

others viewing her unfavorably. Then again, being so stubborn might just mean she was more accepted as an idol. Perhaps it was humanlike to be obstinate in your communication.

There I go again, making unnecessary calculations. Diva shook her head and stopped the activity in her circuits. This wasn't the time to be getting hung up on such things. "Navi, come out in the park with me."

"You mean, 'come out with me, *please*,' right?"

"Come out with me, please."

"Hmm, I don't know… It's just…you're not really my type. I've got a thing for studs who are financially in the upper-middle—"

Diva ignored Navi's response and stepped off the stage. She had twenty-one hours to uncover the true nature of this bug.

. : 5 : .

NIALAND'S TOTAL AREA was quite large at over 700,000 square meters. Even if there weren't any lines, an adult guest might not be fast enough to cram every single attraction—big and small—into a single day. The park had only been 500,000 square meters when it first opened, but it expanded steadily under the motto of "Making memories more memorable." That policy hadn't changed in the seventy-some years of NiaLand's operation.

Since NiaLand was on the seashore, man-made extensions to the coastline had to go up before the park could expand. Diva had made her way to one of these construction sites, filled with heavy machinery, building materials, and attractions still in the testing phase. However, NiaLand's administration envisioned luxurious restaurants here on the seafront, open by the year after next.

"Ugh, the sea breeze is a nightmare on the skin," Navi complained from the drone flying beside Diva.

The drone's head was a fist-sized cylinder with a camera, and the thinner cylinder making up its body housed the battery and circuitry, with two slender propeller blades jutting out. This camera drone watched and recorded the construction work from overhead, and it had GPS integration. The whole device was shaped almost like a water bottle that had sprouted a propeller.

"What are you doing here anyway?"

"Testing my calculation results," Diva said.

After asking the Director for some time, Diva had stood on-stage, unmoving, as she ran through rapid calculations. How could she reveal the bug that was in her body? What method could she use in the short amount of time she had before tomorrow's performance to test every single possibility? One option stood out as having highest probability of success.

Diva had decided to recreate the situation that caused the bug from two days ago, a Class A Risk—an immediate danger that could potentially impede her bodily operations. She'd lost consciousness the moment she determined risk was present. This time, she would try to trigger it herself.

There was one problem with this method: normally, an AI was incapable of self-harm, meaning she couldn't throw herself into danger equivalent to a Class A Risk. She couldn't leap from a high place or turn a deadly weapon on herself and pull the trigger. That would be possible if doing so meant saving a human, but not otherwise.

She could do it indirectly, though. For example, she could hand a lethal weapon to a human who might attack her in the future. If her programming determined that to be a self-damaging act, then *anything* could be categorized as a self-damaging act, and she wouldn't be able to function.

"Navi, create a local connection to those CMs and change their programming online. Then attack me with them."

"Are you serious?"

Diva nodded. She eyed a scattered collection of mascot parts in various shapes and sizes, which belonged to the "Create Your Own Mascot" attraction. Since these would be created mascots, the staff called them CMs for short. It was one of the attractions anyone could interact with.

The park guests used a hologram interface to design their own mascot and then, a few minutes later, they would meet a physical version of their design made from those special parts. Currently, they could only choose from a predetermined set of features, but there was talk of that limitation disappearing in the future.

Normally, the mascot would just walk around the park with their guest and talk with them, but they could also ride go-karts together if they were in the mascots' dedicated area. These days, it was a very popular attraction. The idea originally came from guests expressing a desire to interact more freely with the mascots of the park, like Harry.

Components of the customizable mascots' heads or bodies littered the ground around her. Park guests would never see these disembodied pieces and, in a finished attraction, they would be hidden behind the scenes. The reason for that was simple enough: if the parts lay out and about, it would look like a junkyard—hardly the image NiaLand would have wanted.

Diva explained in detail why she wanted the CMs to attack her, but Navi still hesitated.

"Hrmm…"

"Is their programming too rigid?" asked Diva.

"It'd actually be easy to change their programming, since they're just for testing. That's not the issue here. You're planning on having them attack you to make you feel like you're in danger, yeah?"

"Yes…"

"You really think these little guys can pull that off?" Navi's camera rotated as gesturing toward them.

Diva understood what Navi was getting at. The mascots were meant to look peaceful. Children were the primary target audience for the attraction, so there were a lot of animals and cutesy fruits and vegetables. They looked to be as far from "dangerous" as you could get.

"It's not like it's going to be a fight," Diva said. "I won't resist. And the CMs are sturdy enough for an adult to ride them. With enough speed, they should provide significant force to break me."

"And if you *do* break?"

“You immediately stop the CMs and take my body to the doctor. I don’t mind sacrificing an arm or a leg if I have to.”

Swapping out an arm or a leg shouldn’t have any negative effect on tomorrow’s performance as long as Diva could quickly get used to the new motion circuits.

“I can see the headline now: ‘Songstress Murdered by Park Mascots in Dead of Night.’ This is changing from an opera to a horror movie…”

“Lastly—and most importantly—if my behavior turns abnormal, record my actions and access my internal workings in order to expose the code that’s running. I’ll leave my security access open for you.”

“You sure? There’s a method you’ve got to follow for entrusting people with something. First, you gotta look all apologetic, and then—”

“Begin.”

Diva stood in front of the heaped mascots, exasperated and wondering who in the world had put together Navi’s communication function.

“Ah ha ha ha!”

“What is so funny?!”

Navi cackled as she flew, and Diva sidestepped an obviously awkward headbutt from the giant tortoise coming at her. She reflexively pushed the turtle back, though she clearly wasn’t used to the motion, and it flipped over on its back, legs waving in the air.

“Hey, have you ever heard of this? There was this cartoon about two hundred years ago about a mouse and a cat who were always fighting! They could speak, play instruments, shoot guns, and walk on two legs… And there was this song that all the viewers would break out singing: ‘Set your dial for a while! Have a laugh, wear a smile! It’s the To—’”

“Shut up!” Diva snapped. She’d never heard of a cartoon with such an aggressive premise.

Apparently, she had made a miscalculation. Even though she’d decided to not resist the attacks, down to the last second, the emergency situation would amp up the priority on her “evade” or “resist” actions, forcing her body to move. For several minutes now, she’d waited for the

mascots to come at her, only to dodge at the last second. Of course it would happen; her programming was doing its job.

Diva ran from a huge pumpkin that evoked thoughts of Halloween, then fell. A bow-legged duck lunged at her while she was down, but she caught it.

That was when Navi said, “Hey, Diva. You really look like you’re ‘persevering’ right now.”

“Really?!”

“No. You look like an idiot.”

“You little…!” Diva, nearing the end of her rope, tossed the duck aside and snatched Navi from the air. “I don’t know what kind of ancient media you used to learn your communication, like this *Phantom of the Opera* or a two-hundred-year-old cartoon, but—”

“In front! In front of you! Let me go!” Navi shrieked.

Out of the corner of her eye, Diva saw an elephant’s trunk brandished wickedly right in front of her face.

And then she lost consciousness.

***

“Diva… I realize you were shocked when you couldn’t sing. I was shocked too, and so was everyone else on staff. You understand that, right? We’re all thrown off balance. Yet you went and took your frustration out on the CMs? And to destroy them so completely—”

“No, Director, that’s not…that’s not what I was trying to do…”

The Director’s lecture lasted for two whole hours, and it was three in the morning by the time Diva returned to her room. She only stayed in operation at this time of night once every few years. Most of those instances had been during birthday parties for park staff that dragged on into the wee hours of the night. This was the first time she’d ever had to stay up late due to a reprimand.

In fact, it was her first time being reprimanded, period.

Diva stood in front of her mirror, glaring at her body as if she were looking at her greatest enemy. The bug was still inside her.

She was right: a Class A Risk or something close to it had triggered the bug's emergence. When she regained consciousness, she saw the CMs laying around her, their legs broken to the point that they could no longer move. Diva immediately asked Navi to provide the code.

"No can do," Navi had said. "I was repelled the second I tried to access you. You sure you really left access open?"

Upon further discussion, Diva learned Navi only found even more robust and offensive security than usual. Diva checked her own circuits and indeed found the security she'd left open for Navi had been shut tight at some point.

My body is acting on its own…

She operated the mirror with wild gestures that expressed her irritation, running a video in midair. It was the video data Navi had recorded. There she was—not her, but the bug. Its movements were far more agile than Diva's even when she was dancing on-stage, and it trounced the CMs with ease.

Diva's eyes locked on to the bug's face. It looked just like Diva, but the meticulously crafted features were warped in anger and exasperation.

It looks kind of like it feels…inconvenienced? But I'm *the one who's inconvenienced!*

Diva acted out her "sigh" routine, then closed the video and turned back to the mirror.

"What are you trying to do?" she asked. There was no answer, of course, but Diva continued to speak. "You're the one who's bothering me. If it's so annoying, then just get out of me. You kicked that device on the stage, and you went crazy against the CMs. You seem pretty violent. Or are you just an invader pretending to be my body's protector?"

There was still no answer.

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THE NEXT DAY—or rather, a few hours later—Diva activated at seven in the morning. This was the same time she activated every day, one hour before NiaLand opened at eight o'clock. It didn't matter if her performances were in the evenings or even if she had a day off; she always activated at seven and went on standby at midnight. She had to make sure to move her body a little bit every day to keep her joints flexible.

Immediately after she'd activated, the Director called for Diva. She went to the staff room to find him and some other personnel looking at her with concerned, tired eyes. It seemed her activities from the night before had reached everyone. They asked her how she was, and she answered honestly. "I do not have complete control of my body."

"Your performance starts at seven this evening. You think you'll be able to make it?" the Director asked.

Diva ran several calculations, then spoke cautiously. "I've learned when my body malfunctions. As of right now, there have been no exceptions to those situations."

"As of right now, you say…?" The Director's expression was bitter. "Do you know the probability of a malfunction occurring during your performance?"

"Based on current information, effectively zero. But I can't be certain."

"All right. Can you keep looking for the cause of this? Everyone else, let's reconvene at lunch. That's when we'll decide whether to pull Diva's performance."

Upon returning to her room, Diva listened to the distant voices of the park visitors and music from the attractions as she thought about her next move. She'd known the Director for years, and she knew he wouldn't let an AI onstage if he thought there was a chance they couldn't give a perfect performance. That was the way he thought, and Diva agreed with that mindset. As things were, she wouldn't be able to take the stage today for the first time in sixty years.

"Security paging park staff, security paging park staff."

She received a transmission and automatically brought her hand up to her right ear, the one with the earring.

"A potential lost child has entered the staff-only section of the park. If seen, please secure the child and bring her to the nearest security personnel. Her appearance is as follows…"

"Hm?" Diva sensed something strange about the visual data from her cameras. Still listening to the transmission, she lowered her hand and looked at something on her floor.

It was a big, cute teddy bear—a present from a fan. And it had just moved.

Diva crept closer and crouched to the ground so she could stare at it. "…"

"Graaah!" The bear gave a sudden loud groan and stood.

"Eep!" Diva moved back in surprise.

"Do as I say and I won't hurt you. If you help me…" It walked closer, then froze. "Hey, it's *you*!" it shouted, reaching up to tear its mouth open and reveal a little girl's face inside. "You're Diva, aren't you?! I know you, you're the evil woman who seduced my dad!"

Inside Diva's circuits, the missing-child report continued to repeat, along with a description matching this girl exactly…although it didn't mention anything about her being inside a bear.

Chapter 6:
The Songstress's Adventure

. : 1 : .

"UHHH..." Diva stalled for time as she repeated calculations inside her circuits.

The girl seemed rather worked up. Her appearance suggested she was around nine years old, and she was an exact match for the information about the lost child.

Diva selected a communication pattern from the ones available to her with a tone she used for talking to the average nine-year-old child. "And what's your name, miss? Where's your mommy and daddy? Are you lost?"

"Don't treat me like a child!" the girl snapped, looking annoyed.

Assuming the girl rejected "child" status, Diva bumped up her estimated age. "Could you come out of the teddy bear for me? It's a gift from one of my fans, and it's very important to me. Don't worry, I'm not mad."

"I said, don't treat me like a child!"

Despite her outburst, the girl clawed her way out of the teddy bear. The back of the bear had split open, and Diva held back the circuits trying to make her grimace. She would fix it later or ask the staff to sew it back together for her.

The girl had a slight build and, even though she looked angry now, features humans would consider cute. Her black hair fell down her back, peppered with bits of fluff from the teddy bear's insides. She was wearing a dress with a large bow around her neck. Diva assumed it was the girl's going-out dress.

"I told you I know. What did you do to my dad? What'd you say to him?!" She stepped closer to Diva, who attempted to calm her with hands raised.

“Uh, calm down. Please?”

“I know you did something weird to him. You seduced him, you pervert!”

Pervert. Diva recorded the insult as the first time since her creation she’d ever been called a pervert. Obviously, she had no recollection of doing anything that might cause someone to call her such a thing.

“I think there’s been some mistake here,” she said.

“Don’t lie to me!” The girl thrust her hand into her pocket and pulled something out.

For a brief moment, Diva was on guard, but it was just a small data storage device shaped like a cute rabbit. It was the sort of character merchandise popular with girls and women of all ages. Diva had even seen a female NiaLand employee with the same item.

“This is you, isn’t it? I know it’s you, ’cause I know!”

As the girl operated the device, the rabbit’s eyes glowed, and a projected still from a video appeared in the air. The image was grainy and rough; it was quite old, and maybe even damaged. Although the background was fuzzy, it had been recorded inside a room of some kind.

“…”

Diva was lost for words as she stared at the image. It was impossible to see the details—like the facial expression—but there was the unmistakable sky-colored hair and female body she knew so well. There, in the image, was Diva. There was no doubt about it.

There was something next to her that Diva didn’t recognize. She could see parts that looked like an eye camera and legs, so it was probably an AI. Its rectangular body was made up of fist-sized, silvery-white cubes, a body type Diva had never seen before.

The two AIs were in some room somewhere, looking in the same direction as if they were speaking with someone. The image had been taken from slightly above the two AIs. With the assumption they were in a room, it seemed likely this image had been taken from a security camera installed on the ceiling.

After a few moments, Diva asked, “Where…did you get this?”

“It was in my dad’s database. What did you say to him?!”

Diva was silent. She had never even spoken to this girl’s father. The location from the image didn’t exist within her logs. Even though she knew that, Diva’s calculations kept running rapidly.

“Uh-huh.” The girl’s gaze grew sharper as Diva stayed quiet. “So, you’re not gonna talk, huh? You sure about that? ’Cause this’ll turn into a whole big thing. My dad’s probably gonna *die* because of you, so the police will come for you sooner or later.”

“What…?”

“He’s not gonna do the surgery because of some promise he made you. What’d you make him promise? Tell me!”

A man who was going to die? Surgery? Promise? Police? Diva couldn’t find anything to connect all this in her logs. There was nothing… but a prediction did pop up. She couldn’t be certain, but she decided only one explanation matched.

The bug. This girl has some information connected to the bug version of me.

“Ummm…”

Diva filled the silence once more. This time, it wasn’t to buy herself time to calculate how to deal with a worked-up lost child. A bug existed inside her at this very moment. Her circuits were running hurriedly with the calculations necessary to fight against it.

Seduced. The girl had said that twice.

“Did I…urge your father to copulate with me?” she asked.

“Copulate…?” The girl tilted her head, still glowering. She must not have understood.

Diva rephrased. “Did I try to get him to be in the kind of relationship a man and a woman have? Like, when they’re lovers?”

“What are you even *saying*?! I found this image in my dad’s research data, which is really important to him. Since it was stored in there, that means it has to be a secret. And if that’s the case, then it’s gotta be something bad. That’s what happened in the manga I read! So, I know!”

Diva wordlessly opted to set the manga issue aside. “Research data? Does that mean your father is a researcher?”

The girl puffed up with pride. “He’s a world-famous AI researcher. You really want to kill him?”

After placating her, Diva was finally able to get some information about the girl herself—whose name was Akari—and her father. A few years ago, Akari’s father had withdrawn to a hospital, stepping back from the front lines of research. Instead of being in a lab, he was now spending his days in the hospital. The doctors determined that his condition could easily be treated, but her father had refused to accept it. Now even his mind was growing hazy.

Every time something bad happened, Akari would ask her father why he wouldn’t accept treatment. While he was normally happy to provide kind explanations for any question she asked, he remained stubbornly silent on this one. Akari wanted her father cured, so she looked for the reason he wouldn’t in her own childlike way.

Just yesterday, she had stumbled upon the image in question. She’d shown the image to her father, thinking there was some secret connected to it. And when she did, he finally opened up, his voice heavy as he said, “I made a promise to her. I won’t undergo surgery.” His expression when he said that was softer than she’d ever seen before.

Based on what Akari gleaned from manga and her father’s expression, she concluded that he’d been deceived by some evil woman and began searching for the one in the image: Diva. That was how she’d ended up at NiaLand. She was caught sneaking into the staff-only area, so she ran from security and snuck into Diva’s room, where she hid inside the teddy bear, only to eventually bump into Diva herself.

A promise? To refuse surgery, at that? Diva thought. She felt the sensation of heat suddenly filling her circuits as she listened to the story.

She’d experienced this a few times during her more than sixty years of operation, though it was rare. One time was when a part-time human employee at NiaLand had told her to just “half-ass it like you always do.” Another time was when a particularly passionate fan had come to her room on a behind-the-scenes tour. They’d shouted, “Out of my way. Do you

know how many years I've waited to get here?" then pushed another person on the tour aside, injuring them in the process.

The heat was intense anger.

Diva had absolutely no idea why the bug inside her had made the man promise to forgo surgery, but there was one thing she did know. It had nothing to do with her mission—"to make her audience happy through her singing, for the sake of humanity." Her body was being used for things unrelated to her mission.

Moreover, it seemed this bug had more than just a passing relationship with Akari's father. Diva had already calculated that this whole seducing business was nothing more than Akari jumping to conclusions, but it was obvious from the story that the bug and her father were more than just acquaintances. He was willing to throw away his life for some promise he made this bug version of herself, after all.

If Akari's suspicions were correct, and the bug had seduced her father and all that…

That's almost human *behavior!*

Since learning of the bug's existence, Diva endured several miserable firsts: the inexcusable failure to sing during a rehearsal, a harsh reprimand by the Director—though that was half her own fault—and, potentially, cancelation of her performance. On top of all that, she'd been running endless calculations this whole time without coming up with any answers, wondering whether it was really all right for her to be the unchanging songstress, and trying to determine if she could benefit her audience by showing even *a little* humanity through failure and effort.

"What? If you do something funny, I'll call the police. You're the one who did something bad," Akari said, sounding frightened.

Diva's emotional pattern of anger must have shown on her face. She quickly dialed back the severity, though she made sure to retain her seriousness. "Okay, Akari-san." She decided it would be better to address the girl with that, rather than the more child-oriented "Akari-chan," since she didn't like being treated as such. "I understand. I'll explain everything, but I have to be with your father to do it. Will you take me to him?"

Akari immediately replied, "No! You still want to seduce him."

“I won’t seduce him. Please.”

Akari frowned and grumbled, looking like she was debating with herself. Eventually, she gave the slightest of nods. Diva tried offering a friendly smile, but Akari quickly looked away in annoyance.

“Transmission from Diva to security,” she said, bringing her hand to her ear and opening her transmission circuit. *“I have secured the lost child described in the previous transmission.”*

“Huh? You did? Aren’t you in your room right now?” The response was quick. It was the voice of the same employee who’d sent the earlier transmission.

“I am.”

“So she snuck all the way into the cast area. How’d she manage to do that so quick? All right, I’ll send, uh, Nacchan right away.”

“No thank you. I’ll handle this myself.”

“Huh?” The employee’s surprise was evident over the transmission. *“I guess you or Nacchan would be better to handle the kid than one of us…”* Concerned, he asked if Diva was all right; he must have known her condition was anything but.

She replied that everything was fine, opened a transmission with the Director, and explained that she was going to take the child to her father directly.

“Are you okay, Diva?” The Director sounded cautious, as if worried the wrong approach would break her.

Diva understood what he meant. He was concerned about sending her outside NiaLand, since she so rarely left the park anyway, but there was more to it. This was the first time Diva had ever said she wanted to go outside the park with someone. With his response, he was really asking, *Is everything in order? Are you functioning properly?*

Making sure her voice sounded as normal as possible, Diva said, *“I’m sorry for causing you concern, but my calculation circuit is functioning properly. Additionally, I have determined that taking this child back to her father may enable me to suppress the bug in my body.”*

“I don’t really understand…”

Diva made an apologetic expression she knew the Director couldn't see because she knew that was the case. She hadn't told the Director the details of her body's abnormalities or the nature of the bug. She also hadn't been able to tell him the most accurate information about Akari. She just couldn't bear to admit that the other "her" and gone off on her own and potentially become romantically involved with this lost child's father.

"I know you're aware, but there are only ten hours left before your performance," the Director said.

"I know, but this is necessary. Please, let me go."

There was a brief silence, followed by the Director's huff. *"Okay. We'll keep things ready for you to go on-stage until the very last minute. If it doesn't look possible, then—as bad as I feel for the audience—we'll just have to get them to accept a hologram show."*

"I'm sorry for causing you trouble. I'll make it back in time."

"Be careful."

Their long exchange ended, and Diva lowered her hand from her ear. Akari was waiting, staring at her. It appeared she understood the silence had been a transmitted conversation.

"I'm sorry for making you wait. Let's go." Diva stepped out of her room, with Akari accompanying her without issue. Then Diva added, "By the way, what's your father's name?"

"Don't act all innocent. You already know his name. You can't fool me!" Akari snapped back, walking off quickly as if trying to leave Diva behind.

Diva may have disliked it, but the girl *did* know the way out. It was probably the same way she'd snuck in. As Diva followed, she double-checked that all her circuits were operating properly. If she were a human, it would have been nervousness making her prepare.

Somehow, she believed she'd be able to learn about the bug if she met Akari's father and questioned him about it.

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WHEN THE TWO OF THEM stepped off the self-driving bus, Diva was faced with so much new information that she could feel her processing circuit screaming. Tons of people walked this way and that, making the street just as crowded as NiaLand. The city must not have properly cared for the streets in this day and age; everything was dusty, and many humans avoided exposure to the grime by wearing masks or scarves over their faces.

Lining the road were numerous short, small buildings made of stone. The main drag, though rather narrow, was crammed with shops selling produce and baked goods, independent stores selling secondhand machinery, as well as cafés selling light bites and ice cream. Houses hunched on the side streets but, since they were made with the same stone, they blended in with all the other buildings. They weren't so similar that you could describe them as cookie-cutter, but it probably wouldn't be that much of an inconvenience if any one building was swapped with its neighbor.

On top of all that, there was not a single AI to be seen. That didn't just apply to humanoid AIs, like Diva—there weren't even any AIs who were just programs, like Navi. Diva had seen equipment and machines like holograms and transport drones that used AI technology, but all the voices and bustle of the area came from humans.

This was an area where people opposed to factory-made food lived. It was a so-called "nature block." Diva had knowledge of this phenomenon.

At this point in history, factories made more than 80 percent of the world's food supply, but there was still a significant number of people who didn't approve. Many refused to eat factory-made food for spiritual reasons, earning them the moniker of "anti-factory foodies." People like that gathered in the nature blocks, where they lived their lives. At some point, such places naturally formed in developed countries that used AI technology to achieve high efficiency in their food production. The exact characteristics of the areas varied by region, and each area had its own flavor, but they shared three common traits:

One: The people there didn't eat factory-made food.

Two: The people lived as they would have in bygone eras.

Three: The people had largely anti-AI views.

The logic was simple. If they believed food production in factories that used AI technology was bad, then the next step was to believe that AI technology was bad, and they would refuse the boons of AI technology in their daily lives, which meant they lived in old-fashioned ways.

The most fundamentalist of those people lived without relying on any sort of machinery, similar to the Amish from long ago. But Diva had seen drones in the area, so this nature block probably wasn't so strict in its beliefs. There were also a few tourists, taking photos of it with their handheld terminals like it was some rare sight to see. The residents didn't give these people the cold shoulder and instead urged them to sample some of the local goods. They weren't forcing the natural foodstuffs on the tourists, just recommending them, which appeared to be more proof that this area was open and welcoming.

Even so, Diva didn't see a single AI operating, talking, or thinking for itself.

"We'll walk from here," Akari said, watching the bus leave before pointing somewhere far-off.

Diva looked in that direction and saw a cluster of stone buildings on a hill beyond the nature block. That must be the hospital her father was in. "We're going through *here*?" Diva asked, looking slightly nervous.

Akari nodded. "Since I went all the way out of the hospital, I want to buy Dad a treat."

Diva didn't mention that she was in a hurry. She wasn't even certain if she should frown. "Okay… Then let's stick together." She held her hand out to Akari; it wouldn't do for them to lose each other.

But Akari refused, saying, "Don't treat me like a child." She gave the area a quick scan and walked off.

With no other option, Diva rushed after her, trying to stay close as she double-checked the clothing she'd gotten from Dresser—the device that used holograms to create augmented reality clothing. The holograms were functioning without issue. She didn't want to be recognized by fans on her

way out of NiaLand, so she had Dresser give her a mask, hat, and glasses in addition to some simple garments. A few people had glanced at her, perhaps wondering, but they were able to leave the park and get on the bus without anyone saying anything. Having successfully made the trip, she was now making her very first foray through the nature block.

Generally, Diva's work only took place inside NiaLand, and that was usually limited to going back and forth between her own performances and her room. She only very rarely left the park. Even interviews were conducted in the park because the marketing department wanted to keep meeting Diva a special thing that could only happen in NiaLand.

When she did leave park grounds, it couldn't be for a regular public appearance; it had to be an exceptional case. For example, in the past few decades, she'd only left to go to OGC for major part replacements, or to sing a song of remembrance at funerals for important NiaLand staffers who had passed away.

The farthest she'd ever traveled had been about forty years ago. It had been kept secret from the world, but it was for Grace's going-away party, just before she was to be sent to Metal Float to become the control AI. Even then, Diva had been transported there and back in a NiaLand-owned vehicle. She only walked on her own two feet inside the research facility where the party took place.

There are so many things here that I know about but have never seen before. Such a response might have been expected for a human, and it crossed Diva's mind as she followed Akari.

Angling her eye cameras just slightly to the side enabled her to see countless new things: fresh fruits and vegetables, preserved foods like dried meat, used clothing stores where customers haggled for a discount, hairdressers trimming locks in their storefronts. She could never have seen anything like this at NiaLand. Diva automatically accessed the internet to reference data on each new marvel. It was a human way of living that Diva had only been aware of, but never experienced.

Diva looked this way and that, careful to not get separated from Akari, then realized that Akari also had her head on a swivel. The girl occasionally stepped onto a side road, jerked to a stop upon realizing it was a dead end, then returned to the main road. Eventually, Akari bought some

apples from the largest store on the main road. The fruits were so mottled and inconsistent that there was no way they could have been grown in a factory.

That was when Diva asked, “Is this your first time here?”

Akari immediately looked flustered. “N-no way! I’ve been here before.”

“Okay. How many times have you been here?”

She pouted, looking timid. “…Twice.” Further questioning revealed that the first time Akari had been there was that morning, when she was on the way to NiaLand. “I’m always in the hospital ’cause I have to take care of Dad,” she said as if making an excuse.

“You take care of him? Every day?”

“What? Is there something wrong with that?”

“No… I think it’s wonderful.”

Akari puffed up when Diva said that. “It’s ’cause my dad’s amazing! All sorts of important people still come to talk to him.”

“What do they talk to him about?”

“I don’t know. Complicated stuff. But he’s just amazing.”

Initially, Akari said her father had retired from his work as an AI researcher, which meant these important people were probably former colleagues and others he had connections with through his research.

The image of the bug had been taken a long time ago. She didn’t know the exact time period, but she could tell it wasn’t recent. Perhaps these important people also knew of the bug.

Did the bug help Akari’s father with his research?

AIs did help AI researchers with their work—in fact, it was a necessity. However, Diva was unable to dredge up a convincing reason the bug would help. So far, her most likely theory was that it had to do with the Sisters’ rarity. Because they were so few, people clamored to do research on them.

If, for example, Akari’s father had slipped a virus into Diva’s body that created the bug so he could directly analyze a Sister’s body for his

research, did the bug go to him when Diva lost consciousness? Diva deemed it illogical. If someone had the skills necessary to implant a virus into a Sister's body without leaving a trace, then they were skilled enough to just walk up to the Sisters' developer, OGC, and get themselves added to the research team without having to deal with the risk of the virus. Then Diva could be formally called back to OGC, where the person could analyze her. OGC would welcome someone that skilled with open arms.

That theory also left what Akari's father said about making a promise with the bug unexplained. Diva didn't want to accept it, but the bug did seem to be operating on its own, with its own goals in mind.

"Oh, it's Haru-san's new song!" Akari suddenly cried, sounding elated.

It was the first time Diva had seen the girl smile. Akari ran down a narrow passage along the back of the shop that had been selling apples. Diva chased quickly after her to avoid separation.

The storefront there had music CDs arranged in rows, meant to be collectors' items. Inside the store were old instruments like guitars, keyboards, and violins, all carefully arranged. There was also a chaotic collection of replacement goods, like strings and rosin. The shop was so small that anyone on the huskier side would knock something over unless they carefully sidled through. A middle-aged man minded the shop from the very back, staring apathetically at something on his tablet as Akari bounced around in the front.

Diva determined this was a music instrument and media store.

Akari was fixated on a music memory stick, a rare item in this day and age where all mainstream music was sold as data only. It also came with an additional gift—something on paper. It was the new song from Season.5, Haru's group.

"I forgot it was coming out today," Akari said. Her eyes sparkled as she picked up one of the items in the row and hugged it to her chest.

Looking closely, Diva saw the paper thing was a colored card with a real signature on it as well as a flyer. It made sense; the items—including the memory stick—were in line with Season.5's selling point of "handmade" goods.

“Are you a fan of theirs?” Diva asked, and Akari’s face scrunched as she tried to save face after being caught geeking out.

Rather than deny it, she nodded and said, “Just after they debuted, they came to the hospital and did a performance for the patients. I shook hands with each of the band members.”

A performance for patients? That *did* sound like something Season.5 would do.

“What’s so good about them?” The moment Diva said it, she realized her phrasing was rude.

Akari frowned, as anticipated. “Hmph! I get it… I heard they’re performing on-stage at NiaLand. Are they your rivals or something?”

“I’m sorry, that’s not the case. I only asked because I’m curious.” That wasn’t a lie. If Akari was a fan, then Diva wanted to know what she found so compelling about the human idols.

But Akari clearly didn’t believe Diva, and she harrumphed again. “An AI like you wouldn’t understand.”

Diva froze in place and stared at Akari. “And you *do* understand?”

Akari nodded firmly. “They work so hard. I mean, they managed to land performances at a place as huge as NiaLand. They keep getting better and better at singing, and they’re way cuter now than when they came to the hospital. You started at NiaLand. You were *always* good. That’s unfair. ’Cause I know.”

“…”

Unfair. Diva needed a deep silence in order to digest that word.

“I love my dad,” Akari went on. “I think he’s amazing, but I just wish he’d stop researching AIs and stuff. It’s bad for his health, and he gets seduced by things like you. I hate AIs!”

At the girl’s harsh words, Diva realized that the former bustle of the surrounding area had quieted. Several people had stopped walking or talking and were staring at Akari. The reason was immediately apparent: this was a nature block, so of course the residents quickly picked up on conversations about AIs.

“Um, excuse me?” At some point, the man running the music shop had moved closer to them, his voice questioning.

“I’m sorry. There’s no problem here. We’re fine,” Diva said, assuming they had disturbed him.

“No, that’s not it… Uh, I heard you talking. Are you…Diva-san?”

Both Diva and Akari let out shocked gasps.

Looking satisfied, the man nodded. “I knew it! Mind coming inside? We shouldn’t be out here. Wouldn’t want to cause a scene.”

It likely *would* turn into a scene if people realized there was an AI here, so they did as he suggested. Akari paid for her music at the register, with the shopkeeper stealing glances at Diva all the while. He must have had something on his mind.

Once Akari’s transaction was finished, the man said, “This might be rude to ask, but could I see your face?”

“Uh…” Diva made a hesitant facial expression and shot him a probing gaze.

“I’m a fan,” he explained.

His answer surprised Diva. Behind her, Akari grimaced in annoyance.

A fan… I never expected to find one here. Immediately, she touched her earring to operate Dresser. She left her hat on, but the holographic mask and glasses disappeared.

A smile bloomed on the man’s face. “It really is you… I couldn’t believe you’d be in a place like this, but I was sure it was you when I heard your voice.”

Diva nodded. It was true that she hadn’t bothered to modify her voice. She was also happy that someone recognized her by voice alone. She put a smile on her face—the one she used on-stage, clear and bright. “I’m glad you recognized me, thank you. Can this be our secret, though?”

“You traveling undercover?”

“Yes, something like that.”

The man's smile grew even wider. "I work in music, just like my parents. My dad was a huge fan of yours. If you don't mind, could I ask for your autograph? I have this CD of yours that my dad loved."

"A CD?" Diva replied automatically.

Even in the beginning, when Diva had just debuted, only a few of her songs were ever released on CD. The media format had almost entirely disappeared by then. She'd once heard from a NiaLand employee that they went for a premium among her fans.

The man led them through a narrow door that went into the back of the shop. Diva's circuits calculated this wasn't something she should be doing right now, but they also calculated that encountering a fan in a place like this was rare, and she shouldn't refuse his request. And he'd kept one of her very first CDs. He had to be a huge fan.

Diva checked how Akari was doing. Akari muttered, "Do whatever you want," and looked unamused, but she followed Diva into the back anyway. She kept glancing around the gloomy shop interior, perhaps afraid of the dark.

In the back of the shop was what looked like a garage repurposed into a workroom. There were various instruments and a bundle of tools, as well as wood shavings on the floor. It seemed the man also did instrument repairs.

"Here it is." The man picked up a CD from a set of shelves against the wall. It was her second CD.

The single on this particular CD had often played at the halfway point of her shows. It was rather ethereal because her live singing was laid over sampled recordings of her voice that played at the same time. The CD cover showed a printed image of Diva's face, completely unchanged from its current appearance. Diva carefully accepted the CD from the man. It was the first time she'd held a CD in decades.

"This takes me back…" she murmured, having learned that was the sort of thing humans said when something evoked memories.

Around the time she actively sang this song, she performed to a full house every day. Outside of her performances, she had lots of fan activities, like behind-the-scenes tours in her room and fan meet-and-greets.

Meanwhile, all her new songs were installed and adjusted, and she did frequent interviews with the media. Her schedule was packed down to the minute, making her feel like she was constantly moving, from the moment she booted up in the morning to the moment she went on standby at night.

Diva took the proffered pen and signed the CD cover, careful to not write over her face. She then passed it back with the same reverence as when she'd accepted it.

"Thank you, I'm sure my dad's resting peacefully now," the man said as he held a hand out for a handshake.

She squeezed his hand, used to this sort of exchange. Her communication circuits calculated the meaning of his words, and she made an appropriate facial expression. "Then your father is…?"

"Yeah." He gave a wry smile, still holding Diva's hand. "Quite a while back. And my mom passed last year."

"I'm sorry to hear that…" said Diva, her voice tapering off with regret. She would have liked to give the man his CD in person.

Akari had seemed uninterested in their exchange, but she looked a bit saddened by the man's words. She was likely sensitive to death, considering her father's condition.

"My mom and dad were in a band when they were younger," the man continued. "That's how they met."

"Really? That's wonderful." Diva nodded gently.

She had a positive view of relationships born of music. Several couples had written her letters about how they met at one of her performances in NiaLand. All of them had been overflowing with joy and gratitude.

"Neither made a name for themselves in music, but they couldn't really get away from it either. Dad worked for a company that ran music events, and Mom taught classical guitar. Instruments were my playmates when I was a kid."

Diva nodded again, but she knew something wasn't right. The man was still gripping her hand—this was too long for a simple handshake.

“It started when I was about ten years old.” The man’s hand tightened around hers. “I guess my dad went to one of your performances. Before that, he always joked, ‘Can machines even make music?’ But after that, he got really into your music. He played it at our house constantly. I had to listen to this song so much I got sick of it. It was on so often, I heard it in my dreams. My dad started to push AI events at his company too. It was so weird…like he was in a cult dedicated to you.”

“Um…” Diva’s expression shifted as the strangeness of the situation sank in, but the man kept on talking.

“Work tossed him out, and then he tried to get a job at the park where you were, but I guess he didn’t get it. That’s when my mom took me and moved here. Said she couldn’t stand constantly hearing about ‘AI music this, AI music that.’ Though I didn’t see why that was reason enough to move to this run-down dump without *any* humanoid AIs around.”

Diva went to pull her hand away, but the man yanked her forward instead, bringing his face close to hers. “Do you get it? Do you see the reason why I’m here in this moldy cesspit, lying to dumbasses, telling them these knockoffs are totally real vintage instruments, just so I can scrape together enough to eat? It’s all your fault, you pile of scrap metal!”

“Ah!” No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t escape his grasp.

“I held on to *this*…” The man hoisted the CD aloft, then flung it to the ground with all his might. The case cracked, making for a pathetic sight, and the CD popped out. It was sky blue, the color associated with Diva.

Akari let out a shriek, breaking her silence.

“I held on to this for so long *just* so I could do this in front of you!” the man choked out as he stomped on the CD—twice, then three times. Diva finally slipped away from him as he lost balance, but he still continued to stomp on the CD. “I’m sure you’re resting peacefully now, huh, Dad?! I even got her to sign it! Are you *happy*, asshole?! You bastard!”

Diva couldn’t move or speak. She gaped at the man screaming at the ground. The print of her face slipped out of the case and was torn to shreds. Diva’s eyes focused on a smudge of dark dirt stuck on the image’s pale cheek. The employees at the time had been so particular about the recording

for that CD, making her do several takes for it, and now it was trampled, half shattered.

At last, the man stopped moving. His breathing was heavy and sweat ran down his face. His disheveled hair hung in his eyes as he glared at her. Diva took a step back, almost pressured by him. She kept her eyes locked on the man as she searched for Akari behind her with a hand.

"Your songs…" he muttered, reaching for his repair tools with an unsteady hand.

"To the front, now!" Diva shouted, and her audio sensors picked up Akari's retreating footsteps.

Diva reached up and pulled down a nearby shelf, then spun on her heel and raced after Akari. There was a loud *bang* as the man's tool violently struck the shelf. She slammed the door to the front of the shop shut, then dashed out.

"Your damn music was hell to me! You put me through hell, Diva!"

Even amid the clamor of her escape, the man's voice rang out loud and clear.

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BY THE TIME they finally made it to the hospital, it became clear that the old-fashioned building wasn't a regular hospital at all—although even an adult would've said so if asked. Rather, it was a hospice facility. This place did not provide treatment, but end-of-life care. It focused on QOL, "Quality of Life," giving patients the happiest and most comfortable memories it could for their remaining days.

"Here…" Diva said, handing Akari a paper bag full of apples outside the entrance. "For your father."

Unsurprisingly, the apples Akari had bought had ended up flung across the garage floor. After the incident at the music shop, Diva purchased some more at a store at the edge of the nature block. Despite the

residents' old-fashioned lifestyles, they did still accept electronic payment. With NiaLand's permission, Diva had been able to pay for the fruit herself.

"These aren't meant as amends, but I *am* sorry that you had to go through something scary like that."

"Why are you apologizing?"

Even though she kept quiet as they walked through the block, Akari was clearly frightened. She gripped Diva's hand firmly and didn't dare try to pull away from her. Only once they'd left the nature block, and enough time had passed to write off any pursuers, did Akari awkwardly let go.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Akari said, accepting the apples. In a voice barely above a whisper, she added, "Thanks." After that, she piped back up with her usual suspicion. "Don't get full of yourself, though. You've still gotta explain things. I'm not gonna let you seduce my dad anymore."

"I told you, I won't."

Akari looked away with a huff, then led Diva inside. She walked up the ramp as if she'd done it dozens of times. As she was passing through the automatic door, Diva suddenly asked, "Akari-san, do you like apples?"

"I don't eat them, but Dad and everybody else do."

"Everybody else?"

"The nurses and the lady in the room next to his."

"Oh. Okay, then. Do you cry a lot?"

Akari spun around. "What?! *You're* the one who looked scared."

"That's not what I mean. I just wondered if you were the kind of child who cries often."

"I don't cry. I've never once cried here."

Diva nodded, knowing that was the case.

Akari's father was in room 307. It was a private room with wood-patterned flooring and a pale green privacy curtain. There was a couch beside the bed, and a work desk and chair were tucked in the corner of the room.

“I’m back, Dad. Are you awake?” Akari asked. The ceiling-high curtain separated the bed area from the rest of the room, so they couldn’t see inside. Akari placed the paper bag on the work desk, next to the tablet and data storage devices, then gently pulled the curtain aside.

Diva was rendered speechless when she saw the elderly man lying in bed. She immediately repeated several calculations. She scanned the past profile data she had on the man, applied an aging algorithm to the photo she had saved of him, and found that the result was almost an exact match for the man in bed. Diva knew this old man—she’d met him before.

“Professor Saeki…”

Saeki Tatsuya was an employee at the research institute and medical facility where Grace had worked before she moved to Metal Float. Diva met him at Grace’s going-away party. She hadn’t spoken to him, but surely they’d at least given each other bows of greeting. If her data was correct, he was sixty-seven years old this year.

However, he looked much older now.

“Dad.” Akari didn’t raise her voice. Instead, she kept it hushed, crouching closer and whispering close to his ear to call him again.

“…”

Saeki’s eyes slowly opened. Their yellow tinge drove home how much he’d aged more than the wrinkles on his face, more than the frailness of his wrists.

Akari smiled. “Morning.” It was the first time Diva had heard her speak in such a gentle voice.

“…Morning. Where’d you go earlier?” Saeki asked in that muffled voice unique to the elderly.

Akari looked embarrassed. “I wanted to know, so I went to get her… Sorry.” She flicked her gaze to Diva, who took a step closer to the bed so Saeki could see her better.

Their eyes met, and his widened. “Vivy…”

“Huh…” Diva said, questioning the word that came from his lips.

“Vivy” was a nickname she used decades ago. After the AI Naming Law was passed, the public voted to make “Diva” her official name. No one called her Vivy anymore…so why did he?

Diva frowned, indicating she didn’t understand. She was also surprised. When Saeki saw her do that, his eyes took on a strength far greater than before. Humans might describe it as him feeling youthful again.

After some time, a soft sigh escaped his lips. Then he looked once more like an elderly man lying in bed. “Diva, right?” he asked, seeking confirmation.

She nodded. “Yes. This is our first time speaking.” Surprised, Akari’s head snapped up to look at Diva, but Diva kept her eyes fixed on Saeki. “It’s been a long time, but it appears you remember me.”

“…I do. The last time we met would have been that party. You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Thank you.”

As the two exchanged pleasantries, Akari stammered, “W-wait, wait. Dad, this is that lady! The one in the picture. Y-you’re saying you never talked to her?”

“This is our first time speaking,” Diva repeated, and Saeki nodded slowly.

“What? Wait. But…but…” Akari eyes flicked between Diva and Saeki in confusion, searching for an answer. “Wh-what do you mean ‘that party’? What happened?!”

Diva did a quick calculation and said, “It was a going-away party for my little sister. Professor Saeki had taken care of her.”

Is that true?” Akari asked Saeki. He nodded again. “What… But… In the manga…”

Diva was about to inquire what sort of manga this was, but she held herself back. It didn’t matter. “Professor,” she said instead. “I came here because Akari-san showed me an image. I’d like to ask you something about it.”

“Ask what? What are you planning to do?” Akari snapped.

Diva smiled, trying to reassure her. “It’s okay. I won’t do any of the things you’re worried about, Akari-san.”

Even so, Akari grumbled her disapproval. Diva didn’t know *what* she was so upset about, but her anger subsided when Saeki too urged her to be calm. “Just yell if anything happens, Dad,” she said as if dropping a final admonishment. With one last warning glare at Diva, Akari took the paper bag and left the room.

“Sorry about that. She’s trying to protect me,” Saeki said with a slight smile, but Diva didn’t return it.

“Professor Saeki,” she said, her laden with anxiety. “When and where was that image taken?” He looked back at her in silence, his eyes unreadable. “I have no record of the circumstances surrounding that image. I have thoroughly scoured my logs, which revealed several instances in the past decades since my creation wherein there are also no records. I also discovered that my body was moving of its own accord during those times. I have no doubt it’s a bug caused by a virus. I must eliminate it.”

Saeki didn’t move. He just stared at Diva, not saying a word.

“I heard from Akari-san that you are refusing surgery because of a promise between the two of us.”

“She told you that?” he said, then murmured about how hopeless the girl was.

“However, I have no record of any communications with you since that party, neither in person nor via transmission. And we definitely made no such promise at the party. Professor, you had contact with me when my body’s control access had been stolen from me, didn’t you? You had contact with the bug version of me?”

Saeki erupted into an irregular cough. Diva wondered if it was a bad sign, but it turned out just to be Saeki’s laugh. He tried to suppress his laughter, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes, as his tear ducts had likely weakened with age.

“What?”

“Sorry… I just thought about how AI-like and logical this conversation was. It suddenly reminded me of a time when I was a boy,

which made me laugh."

Diva normally heard "AI-like" used as an insult, and she knit her brows. "Does that bother you?"

"No, I didn't mean anything by it. Actually, I'm used to conversations like that because of my field of work. I'm sorry if it bothered *you*."

Diva shook her head, indicating it didn't. "What did bug-me do with my body? Why did it make that sort of promise with you?"

"Looks like you got misled on that part. I actually never thought you'd come here. There was no promise; I just decided on my own." Saeki's hand slowly moved up to caress his chest, as if he were touching something precious. "My heart's no good. I was born that way. I can't live any longer without a pacemaker. The one I've got in here right now is an old one, well past its lifespan. But I don't want to change it out. Because… it's something you sent me in the past."

Diva leaned forward when she heard that. "Me? You mean bug-me, correct?"

"Yes."

"What is the bug's…? No. Who made the bug? What is their goal? Do you know of any way to remove it from my body?"

"Now that I *did* promise her I wouldn't talk about. I can't answer your questions. Besides, I don't even really know the details."

"Please tell me. What am I? What is my body doing?!" Diva realized her voice was cracking with frustration. As things were, she wouldn't be able to take the stage that night. More importantly, if her mission was to make her audience happy with her singing…

"You put me through hell, Diva!"

As she was now, she had brought suffering to those who had listened to her music. Did she really have the right to stand on the stage in place of humans who were working hard? Even if she did discover the true nature of the bug, *could* she take the stage?

"Please… Please…" Diva repeated, her head bowed low.

Her vision was filled with red error messages. The code pointed to an irregularity in her calculation processes, a notification that her thoughts were illogical. It was the first time she'd ever seen that error. If her internal circuits had lost their function, then her body at least needed to be fine, showing unchanged functionality with steadfast dedication to her mission. The bug threatened that.

There was a silence, one that said far more than words.

Eventually, Saeki spoke up. "I can't answer."

His reply struck Diva as hard as a blunt weapon to the head.

"I'm sorry you came all the way out here," he added. "I hope you can understand."

"…"

Diva raised her head and realized she was making an expression on the verge of tears. The errors continued without end. She minimized the error windows and placed them in the corner of her vision so she could still see, then turned to leave the room. Her communication circuit told her she should give a farewell bow, but she ignored it.

"I'm glad we could meet," Saeki told her. "It always bothered me that I didn't get a chance to thank you. I'm here as I am now because of you, so…thank you."

While Saeki gave a one-sided farewell, Diva gritted her teeth in frustration. This inscrutable information wasn't at all what she wanted.

At that moment, she recalled something she had wanted to warn Saeki about. She didn't mean it in retaliation, but her voice was thick with hostility as she said, "I do have one favor to ask regarding Akari-san. Set her free."

"What do you mean?"

"She's an AI."

"Oh, you could tell?" He gave a thin smile. "Well, of course you could. You're an AI too."

"Most humans can pick out a humanoid AI right away if they interact with them."

The NiaLand staff member had said, *"I guess you or Nacchan would be better to handle the kid than one of us…"* Put simply, they'd decided a fellow AI would be better for handling a lost AI child.

"She said she hates AIs," Diva went on. "You're having her act like a human, aren't you? She doesn't have an eating function, so you program her to eat as little as possible. She doesn't have a crying function, so you program her to cry as little as possible. Even with that, the stress caused by the dissonance between her and real humans will build up. AIs that act like humans…" Diva continued, even though she was aware *exactly* who she really was talking about. "AIs acting like humans are nothing but poison."

"Why is that?"

"Because we can't become human. We live only for our missions!"

Just like Akari, Diva shed no tears. She couldn't cry. Saeki smiled gently as he listened to her. It was such a warm smile.

"I know. That's the way you have to be." He looked at Diva, but it seemed as if his eyes were really focused on something far, far away. "Akari isn't my child. An elderly couple bought and lived with her until a few months ago. She was a replacement for their daughter, who died in an accident. Her mission was to act like a human so her parents could live peacefully. They died, and I took her in before she could be dealt with."

"…If her parents died, then Akari's mission is over."

"Her mission isn't to follow one specific set of parents and then disappear for good. Her mission isn't to *die*. It's to act like a human and do everything she can to make her parents' lives easy. That's something I learned from you… Well, from the other you."

"…"

There was a knock at the door, and Akari called, "Are you done?" She came in without waiting for a response, carrying a plate with a clumsily peeled apple. Immediately, she noticed the tense silence. "What's wrong?"

Diva didn't say anything. She went to leave, but Saeki said in a low voice, "Diva, I don't regret my actions back then. I don't regret having loved *her*. But I also don't hate you. I've finally come to feel this way in my old age. At the time, both she and you were carrying out your missions."

Of course, not a single word of what he said meant anything to Diva.

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"RIGHT... Okay. It's fine, we've finished prepping the hologram performance. Now we just have to inform the audience," the Director said.

Diva bowed her head low. "I'm sorry."

He reiterated that it was fine and tried to cheer her up. The two of them were conversing in her room in NiaLand. It was 6 p.m., and the sun had long since set. Her performance was scheduled to take place in one hour.

After returning from the hospice, Diva had struggled with incessant error messages. She'd walked to her room on feet so unsteady it was hard to believe she was an AI. Although she knew it was futile, she connected herself to the terminal in her room

and ran a self-check. The results showed no abnormalities and claimed no bug existed.

That was when she contacted the Director. She thought a transmission would be enough, but he insisted on meeting her in her room. He most likely wanted to confirm it with his own eyes, so she waited patiently for his arrival.

He knew with one glance that something was wrong. She wasn't wearing her usual soft smile. When she said she wouldn't be able to take the stage that evening, she did everything she could to keep her voice steady at least.

Once he left, she stood alone in front of her mirror. The Diva reflected back at her looked to be functioning properly, save for her unusual expression. Things were different *inside*, however. Her vision was swallowed by error messages and controlling her movement circuit under the stress of all her calculations was so challenging that it caused her to stumble. On top of all that, she had within her an explosive in the form of this bug, and she had no idea where it was.

They canceled a performance because of me… She contemplated the first cancelation in her six decades as a songstress. *But…it is probably best for today*. That calculation result popped out among her still-flustered thought circuit.

All of this was the bug's fault: there was no doubt about that. If the bug didn't exist, Diva would be standing backstage going through the same routine, the final checks she always did alongside the staff before her big show. But now…

Even if the self-check she'd just done had discovered the bug, even if she had been able to eliminate it so that not even a single bit remained…she still wouldn't have had the confidence to take the stage tonight.

Her mission was to make her audience happy through her singing, for the sake of humanity.

"You started at NiaLand. You were always *good. That's unfair."*

But humans were attracted to those who worked hard, and Diva couldn't do that.

"You put me through hell, Diva!"

Some people had become unhappy because of her songs. What if it wasn't just that shop owner and his mother? What if there were more? What if, by continuing to sing, she made even more people unhappy?

"Agh…" She couldn't bring her thoughts to a close. More errors appeared, and Diva groaned quietly. Unable to bear it anymore, she connected to The Archive. The world around her swapped out for the music room lit by the evening sun, and Diva's avatar appeared.

Now that I think about it… When was this theme applied to my Archive?

Diva was used to this appearance of her Archive, as she'd been using it for decades, but she was certain it had originally been something much more mechanical. She couldn't be sure without thoroughly checking her logs, but there were no records of her changing it herself. What if that too—

No… Not now…

Diva hurriedly quashed that suspicious calculation. She couldn't put any more stress on herself.

She looked around the music room, devoid of any life. Several music stands and instruments stood there, positions unchanged. *That's ironic.* Her lips turned up in a weak, self-disparaging smile.

There weren't any real sheets of music on the music stands. They were like windows Diva used when accessing data. Since the instruments were part of the rendering of the room, they would likely create music if Diva used her avatar to play them, but she'd never once done that.

Unread sheets of music. Unplayed instruments. A music room with no music. This space was filled with *things* that weren't fulfilling their purpose. Diva turned toward the piano near the front of the room. She'd never once played the piano, but she thought she might as well let it make some sound now.

At that moment, she noticed something. *Hm?*

On top of the piano was a normally empty music—but this time, it held a single card. Well, it was really data, but it looked like a card with handwriting on it.

Isn't this…?

Diva had seen it before. It was the autograph card that she'd written on the other evening using her real body.

"What are you doing?" she had asked.

She picked up the card in disbelief and flipped it over, begging for an answer as she did. There was something written there.

"Stop worrying about unimportant things and do what you always do: sing with all your heart."

She read it again, then again. The writing was all too familiar, the same as if Diva herself had written it.

"You…" Her voice trembled uncontrollably, and she automatically crumpled the card in her fist. "You've got to be *kidding* me!" Her rage-filled shout echoed in the music room.

Obviously, she hadn't written it herself. It was the bug. When had it left this data? A quick calculation came up with an answer. There was one point when Diva had lost consciousness after she'd left the physical version

of the card in the real world—during her fight against the CMs. The bug had probably gone into The Archive at that time and left this response.

"'Unimportant things'? Like you have the right to say that to me!" she yelled into the empty air. She didn't expect a response, but her ragged voice poured out of her all the same. "This is all your fault! If it weren't for you, Akari-chan wouldn't have come to find me! I wouldn't have met Professor Saeki again! If you didn't exist, I wouldn't be worrying so much!"

That's not true, claimed her barely functioning logic circuit.

The bug wouldn't have any way of knowing Diva's current worries; Diva hadn't lost consciousness once since the fight with the CMs. The bug didn't know Diva had met Akari. It didn't know she'd met Professor Saeki. The "unimportant things" part probably referred to its own existence. But even so…

Diva had to scream.

Just then, a notification popped up in Diva's vision. "Hrm?" It was access from the real world. Someone had come to her room. "Urgh…" Diva glared at the card once more while she waited for her thought circuit to settle. Once she decided she was calm enough, she disconnected from The Archive.

Her error-filled vision immediately came back. She stored the messages away one by one as she accessed the transmission terminal in her room—the source of the notification. "Hello? Who is it?"

"It's me. Can I come in?"

The speaker's profile data appeared on the terminal as the voice was transmitted. It was Haru. Right when Diva disengaged the lock, Haru slipped in impatiently, not even waiting for the door to fully open.

"What's this about?" she said, storming right up to Diva's face. "The Director said you can't perform tonight and they're going to do a performance with holograms."

"It means just that," Diva said, doing her best to keep her voice level. "It would be impossible for me to give a perfect performance as I am right now."

“What’s with you?! I know something happened to you, but your body’s fine, isn’t it?!”

“Like I said yesterday, there’s an issue with my internal circuits.”

“So they’re just going to do a hologram performance?!” Haru was seething.

Diva immediately guessed the reason for that and lowered her head. “I’m sorry. It is possible they chose the hologram show because I made my decision so late. If I hadn’t, the managers could have put together a plan for Season.5 to—”

“I don’t care about that!”

Confusion slipped onto Diva’s face. She was certain Haru longed to stand on that stage.

“Tell me something,” said Haru. “What exactly is the problem with your internal circuits? And why couldn’t maintenance do anything about it?”

“Well…” Diva trailed off, calculating that she couldn’t explain. The strength in Haru’s voice and in her words also led her to calculate that the girl wouldn’t back down. “It’s my music,” she said, scrambling to find the words. “I think it might make my audience unhappy…”

Haru listened to Diva with a doubtful expression. As she gazed at the AI, her face drew taut with suffering, and sorrow leaked into her voice. “I became an idol so I could perform on the Main Stage here someday… And the one who inspired me to do that is *you*, Diva.”

Diva let out a gasp of surprise.

“It was almost exactly ten years ago. April 17th. Row F, Seat 1, right on the edge of the aisle. You’ve got the audience data saved, don’t you?”

Diva did indeed have it saved, although—with the exception of data on special guests—it was all stored in the NiaLand terminals. She connected to the terminal in the room and looked up the audience data for the date and seat Haru had mentioned.

Tokura Haru, age seven. She had an innocent baby face then.

“My parents brought me here for my seventh birthday,” Haru explained. “Our seats were right on the edge, but it was still so fun when the animals in ‘Home Sweet Home’ came out into the audience.”

“Home Sweet Home” was one of Diva’s songs, the headliner for the past twenty years.

“But the thing that gave me the most courage was your voice. I wanted to be just like you someday, standing on that stage, moving people with my music like you do.”

Diva was taken aback as she listened to Haru speak.

Even though Haru spoke of these memories that moved her, she looked terribly pained. “I don’t want to tarnish the stage’s history. It has a magic that changes lives. Today’s audience wanted that magic; that’s why they bought their tickets.” Her eyes brimmed with tears, and she whirled around to hide them. “I don’t mean to put down hologram performances, but that’s not enough to make the magic I experienced. I’m going to go talk to the Director right now and try to get him to agree to let us perform.”

Haru started walking away, but she stopped for a moment. Her voice trembled slightly as she added, “I never wanted to hear you say those things, Diva-san.”

Diva called after Haru before she even realized what she was doing. “Wait!”

The girl’s words ran through Diva’s circuits. At the same time, data of every audience member poured into her, as if pulled in by the data of a young Haru that Diva had just been looking at.

Sixty years of data, more than twenty million people.

Children like Haru. Parents who brought them for their birthdays. Young couples who picked her show as part of their honeymoon. Old couples who came back to the exact same seats they had fifty years ago on their honeymoon. Regulars who came every day for a pick-me-up and were still moved to tears every time. Visitors from overseas who chose her performance as their first-ever live concert. Students who attended her performance on the last field trip before their school closed down. Hopefuls who came seeking the courage to propose to the person they loved.

Guests on the behind-the-scenes tour spoke about how she had moved them to tears—some even decided to work at NiaLand. Kids secretly saved up their allowances so they could bring their younger siblings. Some people wrote her every year to tell her again how moved they'd been the first time they saw her perform. Others memorized all the lyrics to her songs, even though they tended to be long, and sang excitedly alongside her.

So, *so* many people.

Diva suddenly realized that the error messages in her vision had completely cleared. As confused as her thought and logic circuits had been, they were now operating properly.

She noticed the card on top of the chest of drawers out of the corner of her eye. Nothing was written on the back of it here, but the bug had left a message on it in The Archive: *"Stop worrying about unimportant things and do what you always do: sing with all your heart."*

There was the question she'd written on the front: *"What are you doing?"*

A smile naturally came to Diva's face. It was like she was being chided.

Haru must have caught a hint of Diva's smile; instead of waiting for Diva to continue speaking, she turned back around. "Uh, what's going on?" Suspicion crossed her face when she saw Diva's expression, so different from just a moment before.

"Haru-san," said Diva, her smile growing. "I'm sorry, but you won't be able to take the stage tonight."

"I know there's not a lot of time. But if they're already changing the program, and if we push back the performance time just a bit—"

"That's not what I mean." Diva looked straight into Haru's eyes and declared, "*I'm* going to take the stage."

Haru fell silent. Then she looked at Diva standing there, beaming, and an exasperated smile rose to her face. "Oh yeah? Then you'd better start getting ready. They've already started telling the audience about the change in the program."

She went to leave the room.

“Haru-san,” Diva called out again, but the words wouldn’t really come out. Her operating circuits told her that a human might call this something like embarrassment.

“What is it? You don’t have much time,” said Haru.

“Um…” Diva eventually gathered her courage. “Haru-san, are you happy?”

Haru looked at Diva, surprised. Then she grinned. “Are you trying to ask if your songs made me happy? Or if they made me unhappy?”

Diva looked away, trying to hide the fact that Haru was right. She couldn’t look Haru straight in the face.

Seeing that, Haru’s teasing smile grew even wider. Then she harrumphed and, in a somewhat mocking tone, added, “You know how many people are coming to see Season.5, don’t you? We never pull in anywhere near your numbers, but one of our concerts already has *way* more people in the audience than one of yours. That’s how many people are coming to see us. So yeah, of course I’m happy.” With a casual wave, Haru finally left the room.

As the door closed, Diva murmured, “Thank you.” Haru didn’t reply; she probably hadn’t heard.

Diva quickly activated her transmission circuit to contact the Director, but a piece of data popped up from her logs, stopping her.

“Vivy.”

Professor Saeki had said that when he saw Diva. It was her old nickname, which she hadn’t used since she’d been given the name Diva. Perhaps the bug was using that as its name?

“I know, I know. Stop worrying about unimportant things, right?” she muttered to herself, opening a transmission to the Director.

As she did, she felt exasperated with herself because she’d spoken to the bug almost as if it were her friend.

Afterword

"I'M A BIT WORRIED about something, could I ask you for advice?"

Hello! Nice to meet those of you I haven't met, and long time no see for those of you I have. This is Tappei Nagatsuki. Thank you for joining us for the second volume of *Vivy Prototype*!

Since you're here reading Volume 2, I'm going to assume you already know what happened in the first volume—and that you probably know that I, the one who did not write this volume, am in charge of the afterword.

This series, *Vivy Prototype*, is being published as set of original concept novels for the TV anime *Vivy -Fluorite Eye's Song-*. Some of you may be thinking, "And what *are* concept novels?" Feel free to take the words literally and just think of it as a series of novels that acted as the original proposal for the anime.

Just like the name *Prototype* we gave the series, the books are a work about Vivy from before we tackled the anime. But that doesn't mean this is any less developed or any less complete than the anime. As a prototype, this *Prototype* is complete, both as a novel series and a solitary work.

As those of you who are avid readers of this work and viewers of the anime may know, the *Vivy* anime is not simply an animated adaptation of the novels. The work becomes a full-fledged anime once images, voices, music, and other elements are added to the production. To accomplish that, we had to pick and choose what we wanted by cutting out some of the lengthier sections of the original novels or by looking more in-depth at some things that only occurred between the lines in the novels, testing the strange things in production.

That's the sort of relationship we aimed for between the *Vivy* concept novels and the anime. It may be because we insist on this "original concept novel" distinction that we can make the changes more obvious, in contrast to the relationship between the many anime out there and *their* original works. Vivy and Matsumoto are certainly different. Their relationships with

the characters they interact with, how things are resolved in the minor arcs, and even the details of what happens are different.

I think when it comes to enjoying the novels and the anime, one way of doing that is to relish the differences themselves. In that sense, I think the differences between the novels and the anime stand out in that particular respect of "enjoying the difference." So, please, dig into the differences to your heart's content as you read and watch the works. Doing so will surely draw you into the world of *Vivy* even more.

At this point, I've talked about what an original concept novel is, and now I'd like to use a small portion of my space here to write a little something about the start of this adventure.

It was the winter of 2016. I had just finished off one of the largest projects of my life when I got a message from my good friend, Eiji Umehara. I owed Umehara-san a lot for help he gave me on a different project, so I was more than happy to take him up on his invitation without question. What awaited me in the Shinjuku izakaya was Umehara-san along with Wada-san from WIT STUDIO, who I worked with on this project. And this is what Wada-san had to say:

"I'm thinking of a work with AIs and singing themes. What do you think, Nagatsuki-san?"

Four years whizzed by after that, and I was able to dive into steadily working on the *Vivy* story, all the while becoming aware of how difficult it is to create such a thing. It was hard work getting the entire series written to its conclusion before the anime.

When we first heard the pitch, we thought, *Hey, this sounds interesting!* But then we remembered we were the ones who would have to write it, which is when we thought, *We've been tricked!* Eventually, we got past all that, and Vivy saw the light of day.

For those of you who watched the anime, did you enjoy the images that capture your eyes and the music that captures your heart? Please do continue to read the novels and enjoy the story.

I would also like to use this space to thank Umehara-san and Wada-san for that day in the izakaya where they called me out into their trap.

Thank you for involving me in this wonderful work. Just please let me write off all the Monster energy drinks I needed as work expenses!

And with that, I have used up some space on the pages by laying bare the history of *Vivy*. Now, I'd like to move on to giving thanks to everyone who's helped along the way.

First and foremost, thank you to our lead editor, Satou-san, who put in an incredible amount of work. I'm sorry for all the trouble we put you through when we made you wait with the excuse that the manuscript itself had a first draft. Even so, it was hugely motivating to hear your thoughts on the book every time we had an illustration meeting or something, so thank you very much!

To loundraw-sama, your illustrations, including character designs, have a delicate sensibility that decorates the world of this work. Every time I saw them, my heart would race, and I would fall in love with them. Even though this work is a novel, the power of an image is absolute! Thank you for working on both volumes one and two. I look forward to your help on the final installment in the series!

A huge thank you to all the animation staff, including director Shinpei Ezaki-san, of course. It goes without saying that *Vivy*, a story that started in an izakaya, couldn't have evolved into an entertaining anime without all your help. At the point of me writing this afterword, you will be struggling with the anime and the novels, so thank you for keeping at it until the very end!

Then there is Wada-sama and Ootani-sama of WIT STUDIO, as well as Takahashi-sama of Aniplex, and all the people in the producer ring who are indispensable for making an anime. You all helped so much with the novels, reading through the anime script, and in so many other ways as well. I really and truly thank you.

Most importantly I would like to thank Umehara-sama for getting me involved in the world of *Vivy*. From the first time we met, I always thought you and I had similar tastes, that the sorts of stories we liked tended to be similar, so I enjoyed discussing writing with you. I think *Vivy* is a result of that too. I look forward to working with you on *Vivy* until the very end!

Lastly, I would like to give the biggest thank you to all of you readers who picked up *Vivy Prototype* and made it all the way here to the afterword.

I wonder how you experienced *Vivy* first, through the anime or the novels? I hope you enjoy them both. That's the secret to enjoying *Vivy* to the fullest!

All right! Thank you for reading all the way through this long-winded afterword!

I look forward to seeing you all again at the next Singularity Point!

Thank you for reading…or rather, "Thank you for your kind attention!"

Tappei Nagatsuki

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